

9/11 and Terrorism: “The Ultimate Teachable Moment” in Textbooks and Supplemental Curricula

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A recent poll asked American adults to identify “the single most significant event that has happened in your lifetime, in terms of its importance to the U.S. and the world.” Two percent of respondents pointed to the collapse of communism; three percent cited the Vietnam War; six percent named the Iraq War. Only one event elicited substantial agreement among respondents: fully 46 percent of those polled cited the attacks of September 11, 2001, as the most significant occurrence in their lifetime.¹

In light of these results, it is not surprising that shortly after 9/11, many non-profit organizations, for-profit publishers, and even the federal government developed curricular materials on 9/11 and its aftermath. As one curriculum writer explained, “The attacks of 9/11 are just too important to ignore. They present the ultimate teachable moment.”

While there was strong agreement that 9/11 deserved inclusion in the curriculum, precisely *what* students should learn about 9/11 and its aftermath was a point of contention. Many prominent conservatives took umbrage at what they interpreted as classroom responses designed to foster a critique of the U.S., while many from the opposite side of the political spectrum worried that 9/11 would be exploited to promote a jingoistic form of nationalism. This disagreement was foreseeable. Evidence shows that schools in the U.S. are rife with conflict about which ideologies merit official recognition.² More significantly, schools are one laboratory in which ideologies that often become dominant are *formed*. This

undoubtedly explains why there was so much controversy after 9/11 about what teachers and curricula should communicate regarding what happened on 9/11, why the attacks occurred, and what response from the U.S. was justified and prudent.

Given that schools not only reflect “official knowledge” but contribute to shaping it, it follows that studying teaching materials written about 9/11 can shed light on the narratives that dominate this area of our national discourse, along with what is presented as “true” about 9/11 and its aftermath. Moreover, this analysis provides an opportunity to assess the differences among materials produced by non-profit organizations, the government, and for-profit companies.

To that end, in 2003 we began studying the content of 9/11 text and video curriculum materials from six major U.S. non-profit curricular organizations, along with a video and accompanying lessons developed by the U.S. Department of State.³ (All were published within one year after 9/11.) In the summer of 2005,

we broadened the study to include top-selling U.S. history, world history, and government textbooks that were published between 2004 and 2006 and that addressed the events of 9/11 and the war on terrorism (See Table 1).⁴

The Ubiquity and Malleability of 9/11

When we embarked on this study, we were struck by the number of organizations that quickly distributed social studies curriculum materials on 9/11; a few years later, we were again struck by the prominent attention given to the attacks of 9/11 in social studies textbooks published by major corporations. Clearly, 9/11 and its aftermath were seen as important topics that deserved curricular attention—but what 9/11 is important for, and how it fits into the curriculum, differs widely depending on the overall purpose of the organization or the topic of the textbook. Non-profit organizations used 9/11 in ways that aligned with their missions, while textbooks treated 9/11 in ways that are directly linked to the subject of the books. For example, the Choices for the 21st Century Project at Brown University focuses primarily on foreign policy decision making. While their foreign policy materials always look beyond U.S. borders, they are often rooted in questions concerning what the United States should do relative to other

Table 1. The Curriculum in the Study

Non-Profit Curriculum Title	Publisher	Textbooks Title	Publisher
<i>Terrorism: A War Without Borders (2002)</i>	U.S. Department of State	<i>American Odyssey (2004)</i>	Glencoe / McGraw Hill
<i>First Vote (2002)</i>	Close Up Foundation	<i>America: Pathways to the Present (2005)</i>	Pearson / Prentice Hall
<i>Terrorism in America (2002)</i>	Constitutional Rights Foundation	<i>The Americans (2005)</i>	Houghton Mifflin / McDougall Littell
<i>Civil Liberties and Terrorism / Iraq: Should the U.S. Launch a Preemptive Attack? (2002)</i>	Educators for Social Responsibility	<i>World History: Connections to Today (2005)</i>	Pearson / Prentice Hall
<i>September 11: Commemorating America's Civic Values (2002)</i>	Bill of Rights Institute	<i>World History: Patterns of Interaction (2005)</i>	Houghton Mifflin / McDougall Littell
<i>Responding to Terrorism: Challenges for Democracy (2002)</i>	Choices for the 21 st Century	<i>World History (2005)</i>	Glencoe / McGraw Hill
		<i>U.S. Government: Democracy in Action (2006)</i>	Glencoe / McGraw Hill
<i>Identity, Religion, and Violence: A Critical Look at September 11, 2001 (2002)</i>	Facing History and Ourselves	<i>MacGruder's American Government (2005)</i>	Pearson / Prentice Hall
		<i>Street Law: A Practical Course in Law (2005)</i>	Glencoe / McGraw Hill

parts of the world. The curriculum that Choices produced after 9/11, *Terrorism: Challenges for Democracy*, mirrors the way the organization has framed issues in the past: It features a capstone activity that asks students to deliberate four different options for dealing with terrorism via a simulation of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Similarly, the Close Up Foundation was working on developing a video on youth voting when the 9/11 attacks occurred and subsequently decided to frame the video by opening with 9/11 and the experiences of students at a school close to the World Trade Center. Thus, while the Choices Project suggested deliberation as an appropriate citizen response to 9/11, Close Up promoted voting.

Attention without Detail

We were surprised that the majority of the textbooks and many of the other materials did not go into much detail about 9/11—even though 9/11 was referenced multiple times throughout the books (it was mentioned in 16 different places in *Democracy in Action*). But there was not a connection between the number of words devoted to 9/11 and the level of detail about what actually happened on that day. For example, only four of the nine texts mentioned how many were killed in the attacks or who was responsible for them, which belies the notion that

textbooks always “cover” basic content information. We compared what these textbooks said about Pearl Harbor and found that most of them went into fairly elaborate detail about what happened on December 7, 1941. It was interesting to us that the books took a different tack with respect to 9/11. It’s possible the writers assumed that students would already know what occurred on that day. Bear in mind, however, that a 15-year-old sitting in a high school class in 2007 was only nine when 9/11 occurred.

What was 9/11?

Notwithstanding the different ways 9/11 is used in the materials, there are significant similarities in how the authors describe what 9/11 was and why it matters. Without exception, all the materials state clearly that 9/11 was an act of terrorism, and an especially horrific one at that. It is not surprising that 9/11 is always portrayed as an example of terrorism, but it is important to note that it is the only example of terrorism that appears in *all* of the materials we reviewed—even though we found more than 40 other examples of terrorism laced throughout the publications. All the materials utilize powerful words such as “horrendous plot” and “unprecedented” to describe the attacks. For people in the United States, 9/11 is a “day imprinted on the minds of many Americans” and something that

people in the U.S. reacted to “in horror.” In other books, the emphasis is on how significant 9/11 was for the world. For example, *World History* describes 9/11 as a “turning point” in world history and a “crime against humanity” writ large (not just a crime against Americans).⁵ Clearly, the authors seek not only to include 9/11, but also to emphasize its importance as the *defining* event of the recent past.

Creating an Iconic Image

The images that the materials developers selected to illustrate 9/11 were also remarkably similar. All nine textbooks and two of the other resources contain images that show rubble after the destructive attacks of 9/11. Two of the books depict rubble from the Pentagon, while the other seven show rubble at the World Trade Center site in New York City. The pictures of New York City are especially striking because all of them include New York City firefighters. Of the seven, six include the American flag raised at Ground Zero. Three of the texts have the exact same picture of three firefighters raising the American flag, while two others have a different image of the same event, probably taken soon after the flag was raised (see photo on page 233); one other includes both firefighters and an American flag.

By selecting firefighters raising the U.S. flag as the main image to represent

9/11, the text developers have chosen to emphasize patriotism, nationalism, and heroism. This image reinforces the view that when the United States faces significant challenges, its people rise to the occasion, rally around the flag (literally and symbolically), and put their personal needs aside to engage in individual acts that further national interests. Conversely, if the texts emphasized pictures of the destruction caused by 9/11 (such as planes hitting buildings) or people grieving those who were killed that day, the message would be quite different—the United States as harmed and weakened.

What is Terrorism?

One especially notable difference among the materials is how they approached the concept of terrorism. We were particularly interested in whether the materials provided one definition of terrorism or presented multiple and competing definitions, what examples of terrorism were presented, and whether there was alignment between the definition of terrorism and the examples. All but two of the textbooks provided explicit, authoritative definitions of terrorism, while two contained no definition. *The Americans* states that “Terrorism is the use of violence against people or property to try to force changes in societies or governments,” while *Democracy in Action* includes this definition: “Terrorism: the use of violence by nongovernmental groups against civilians to achieve a political goal.”⁶ Note that there is a significant difference between these 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.

While there are differences among the definitions of terrorism given in the textbooks, none of them allows for the possibility that its definition could be contested or wrong. That is, they present terrorism as an established concept that means the same thing everywhere. By contrast, terrorism is presented as a contested concept in the written materi-



Firefighters Raise a U.S. Flag at the Site of the World Trade Center in New York, September 11, 2001 (Photo by Thomas E. Franklin/The Bergen Record/Getty Images)

als 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 Project (the only three of the materials that explicitly deal with the conceptual meaning of terrorism). 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.⁷

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

Table 2. Decision is Left to Student About Whether Each is An Example of Terrorism

Hypothetical Situations	Actual Events
1. "A radical environmental group burns down a vacant hotel that was recently legally built in a wilderness area."	1. Columbine High School, 1999
2. "Country X, during a time of war, accidentally kills civilians while conducting bombing raids in Country Z."	2. Bombing of <i>Los Angeles Times</i> in 1910
3. "Country X hires an organized crime group in Country Z to assassinate civilian leaders of a group opposing the international policies of Country X."	3. Murder of former Idaho Governor Frank Steunenberg, 1905
4. "A national separatist group in Country X blows up a railroad station in Country Z to discourage that government from supporting policies of the government in Country X." (p. 23)	4. Murder of two employees of Slater and Morrill Shoe Company, 1920
	5. Bombing of 16th St. Baptist Church, 1963
	6. Unabomber, 1985–1995
	7. Ku Klux Klan:
	a. During Reconstruction
	b. In the 1920s
	c. During the Civil Rights Movement
	8. Tylenol murders in Chicago, 1982
	9. Assassination of William McKinley, 1901
	10. John Brown's raid, 1859
	11. Attack on Lawrence, Kansas, led by William Quantrill, 1863
	12. Boston Tea Party, 1773
	13. Bombing of abortion clinics, 1980 to present

Source: *Terrorism in America*, 2nd Edition (Constitutional Rights Foundation)

Rights Foundation's curriculum and in the written materials that accompany the State Department 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 (see Table 2). In the Choices materials, students engage in a similar activity where they analyze whether Nelson Mandela and others should be considered terrorists or something else (freedom fighters, for example).

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 only one of the texts, *Patterns of Interactions*, includes domestic terrorism in its definition, but all three American history textbooks include the Oklahoma City Federal Building bombing as an example of terrorism. 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 and Glencoe's *Democracy in Action* and *World History* all refer to the attack on the U.S.S. *Cole*, a U.S. Naval destroyer. Finally, two texts, *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.

It is misleading to state that terrorism has a clear definition and then give examples that do not meet the 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.⁸ While we recognize how difficult that is to do 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 tack taken in the other materials and explicitly engage students in the controversy about what

the concept means.

Finally, it is important to point out that the vast majority of terrorist acts in the textbooks and materials involve the U.S. or its allies. The resulting message is that terrorism is a more significant problem for the U.S. than for other nations, despite the fact that North America as a region had the lowest number of terrorist attacks, only 17, between 1997 and 2003. While the terrorist attacks that have occurred against U.S. targets are significant, the U.S. Department of State identifies 274 attacks in Western Europe during that same time period and a staggering 820 attacks in Latin America (including South America).⁹

Nature of Intellectual Work

In addition to examining what the curricula say about the events of 9/11 and the subsequent war on terrorism, we also analyzed the nature of the intellectual work being asked of students in the materials. Here, too, we found that the focus of assessment items aligned closely with the overall mission of the text or organization. These items differed greatly in the amount of intellectual work they asked students to do, from comprehension or identification items to asking students to

compare and contrast or even deliberate on issues of controversy related to 9/11 and terrorism. Overall, however, none of the texts or materials we examined challenged students to critically examine the roots of the attacks or to analyze the external policies of the United States, despite conservatives' allegations that curricula developed after 9/11 encourage excessive or unpatriotic critiques of the United States. In fact, we found just the opposite: The United States is presented as a victim that deserved and received the world's support in the wake of 9/11.

To analyze the nature of the intellectual work required by these items, we coded them as requiring higher order thinking or lower order thinking as defined by Newmann and Wehlage. Higher order thinking items require students "to manipulate information and ideas in ways that transform their meaning and implications, such as when students combine facts and ideas in order to synthesize, generalize, explain, hypothesize, or arrive at some conclusion or interpretation." Lower order think-

ing items require students "to receive or recite factual information or to employ rules and algorithms through repetitive routines."¹⁰ We looked further to examine the nature of the higher order thinking and lower order thinking items and what they asked students to know and do related to 9/11 and terrorism.

The textbooks contained an average of 10 assessment items related to 9/11 and terrorism, ranging from *American Odyssey* with a total of four items (1 higher order thinking, 3 lower order thinking) to *Street Law* with 21 items (19 higher order thinking, 2 lower order thinking). The textbooks generally utilized lower order thinking items to check comprehension of the text and focus attention on particular content. The goal was almost always for students to know what happened in an objective way. For example, a lower order thinking item from *Patterns of Interaction* asks students, "What methods do terrorists use?" and includes a list of possible answers in the text (e.g., cyberterrorism or biological and chemical

attacks) for them to identify and write down or recite.¹¹ Higher order thinking items in the textbooks generally engaged students in comparing, contrasting, or synthesizing ideas from the text. For example, an item from *Street Law*, the text that offered the most intellectually challenging and thoughtful items, asks students: "Is the war on terrorism similar to other wars where rights have been restricted? How is it the same? How is it different?"¹² In order to successfully respond to these questions, the student would need to compare and contrast previous examples of the restriction of rights during wartime, such as the detention of Japanese Americans during World War II, with rights restrictions enacted under the USA Patriot Act. In most of the textbooks, however, students are rarely asked open-ended questions or provided tasks that require them to take a stand on or deliberate a controversial aspect of the events.

As we expected, given their greater length, the materials developed by the non-profits and the Department of State

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included more assessment items than the textbooks, averaging 42 items and ranging from the Bill of Rights Institute with 10 items (9 higher order thinking, 1 lower order thinking) to Choices with 97 items (55 higher order thinking, 42 lower order thinking). On the whole, the materials created by non-profits included a higher percentage of higher order thinking items than the textbooks, and many more items that challenged students to wrestle with some of the controversies that surround the concept of terrorism and the war on terrorism. For example, Educators for Social Responsibility included a section on the then impending war in Iraq as part of their lesson on the war on terrorism, and asks students “What are current major questions about Iraq and weapons of mass destruction? Can you answer any of them with certainty? If yes, which ones? If not, why not?”¹³ Students were provided with a reading that outlined the major arguments on both sides of the weapons of mass destruction issue and asked to analyze and interpret what they read.

Different Approaches, Diverse Views

In conclusion, we found vast differences among the approaches taken in most of the textbooks on one hand, and those of the non-profit organizations and Department of State on the other. The majority of the texts and several of the materials present terrorism as uncontested and give the clear impression that terrorism is more of a problem for the United States and its allies than for other nations and peoples. In contrast, many of the other organizations consciously invite students into the deliberation about what should be considered terrorism, although it is important to bear in mind that none of the materials asks students to question whether 9/11 was an act of terrorism or suggests that the U.S. government has ever been responsible for terrorism. But many of the other materials emphasize policy decisions made in the wake of 9/11 as matters of contemporary controversy—as does one of the textbooks (*Street Law*), which became especially evident when

analyzing whether higher or lower order thinking was emphasized throughout the materials.

One impetus for conducting this study was to examine whether curricula developed by educational organizations (as opposed to large corporate publishers) present young people with a broader or more interesting range of information about an important event than is typically found in textbooks. If so, we reasoned, then these organizations were making a contribution by diversifying the views that young people are asked to consider and analyze. Moreover, the lessons in many of the materials developed by the non-profit organizations were highly engaging—and without exception, they were much less expensive than traditional texts (several were distributed free of charge). While there is much to critique in many of the lessons, it is important to point out these organizations were operating to expand the range of possibilities available to teachers who wanted to infuse their curriculum with information and activities about 9/11 and its aftermath.

There is an “American Tale” of 9/11 presented in everything we examined—both in what is given attention and what is left out. But convergence does not equal sameness: some of the materials ask students to think deeply about difference (how terrorism should be defined, for example, or what policies the United States should adopt), while others do not. Given that much of what people in the United States seemed to agree about immediately after 9/11 has become quite contested, the materials that embody and breathe life into those differences are clearly more authentic to the actual political community we inhabit. Interestingly, many of the materials developed in the year after 9/11 anticipated these disputes, while the textbooks written five years after 9/11 omit them. To us, that is a difference that matters when creating materials designed to help young citizens in our democracy understand, reflect on, and respond to “the ultimate teachable moment.”

Notes

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3. Professor Diana Hess worked with Jeremy Stoddard, then a graduate student, and a team of other graduate students on the first stage of the study analyzing the non-profit and U.S. State Department curricula: Kristen Buras, Ross Collin, Hilary Conklin, Eric Freedman, and Keita Takayama; and with Jeremy Stoddard and Shannon Murto on the second stage focusing on the textbooks.
4. More detailed descriptions of our findings will be available in Diana Hess, Jeremy Stoddard, and Shannon Murto, “Examining the Treatment of 9/11 and Terrorism in High School Textbooks,” in *Educating Democratic Citizens in Troubled Times: Qualitative Studies of Current Efforts*, eds. Janet Bixby and Judith Pace (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, forthcoming 2008). For information about the methodology used in the study, please contact Diana Hess at dhess@wisc.edu.
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