

**Comparing High School and College U.S. History
Textbooks: What are we Missing?**

Matthew J. Ribuffo
SUNY Purchase College

Abstract

College-level history professors have noted that students are lacking a fundamental understanding of historical events and concepts. This study posits that the quality of textbooks used in high schools negatively impacts the learning experience of students and seeks to determine the validity of this notion. This study performs a content analysis of a high school level and intermediate high school to college-level textbook's excerpts on the events leading up to the American Revolution to determine what events each text focuses on, the level of detail each work goes into, and what content, if any, is missing. The study finds that the high school level text does miss out on some key events while glossing over others to perhaps deliver a broader, surface-level understanding of content.

Introduction

A common complaint of college-level history teachers is that students are missing fundamental understanding of historical events and concepts and must backtrack to reteach students material that should have been learned during high school in entry-level college history courses. Why is this? One hypothesis is that the materials an instructor has to teach with directly impact the average student learning experience.

While an expert teacher or professor can still facilitate a rich learning environment by their own means and substitutions for classroom materials, novice instructors who are not as skilled in their profession may find it much more difficult, if not impossible, to teach a class without quality materials. This idea extends to a material that is among the most available sources of information that a student has access to in the classroom: the textbook. It seems plausible at a glance to question if the content found in a high school textbook is written at a level high enough or with a depth critical enough to educate students at a level which prepares them for college history courses.

This study attempts to better understand the differences in the level of content between high school and college-level textbooks by examining passages from both and comparing the two works. An admitted weakness of this study, however, is that it only covers a small range of

material from two texts, although they are both widely used. A suggestion for future research is to incorporate more textbooks from different publishers, as well as more scholarly readings from college courses.

Methods

The study consists of a content analysis of historical literature. In order to better understand the differences in materials used to instruct high school students compared to college students, selections have been procured from two different works; a high school textbook, an intermediary textbook used in both high schools and colleges. The topic of these works is the events leading up to the American Revolution; the reason this topic in particular has been chosen is due to its significance to U.S. History; an event of this magnitude and importance to American Education guarantees that it will be taught at all levels and in all curriculums.

The first of the readings is sampled from McGraw-Hill's *United States History and Geography, 2018 Edition*. McGraw-Hill is in the top three largest educational publishers (Bookscouter, 2019), whose works are utilized in many U.S. schools; this makes it a good sample to analyze as its broad reach allows a reasonably accurate understanding of what materials are used to facilitate learning.

The second reading comes from the Openstax *U.S. History* textbook, published by Rice University in Houston, Texas. This openly licensed text has been written for usage in high schools and colleges alike, and currently sees use by nearly 3 million students (Ruth, 2019). The book was published as a resulting movement from Rice University to decrease textbook costs for students. It's status as a widely used textbook in several levels of education makes it an excellent candidate to bridge the gap between high school and college level materials.

A chapter from both works will be analyzed and contrasted to understand how classroom materials may be similar or different between high school and college. In particular, the study will aim to examine what experiences and events the material focuses on, level of depth the material of each passage explores relative to each other, as well as any content which may be left out of one excerpt compared to another.

Findings

McGraw-Hill

On a first read, the McGraw-Hill excerpt is very straightforward. The entire excerpt- which covers the French & Indian War, buildup to the revolution, and the war itself- is twenty-two (22) pages of material. Very little of the reading covers the French & Indian War, however.

Roughly one page is dedicated to setting the stage for the conflict, in which McGraw-Hill introduces the Ohio River Valley as a very important resource, and the stakes that the French and British powers had in the region; France as a passageway between St. Lawrence and Louisiana, and Britain for fur traders and land speculators to more easily move about.

Interestingly, in McGraw-Hill's coverage of the material, they choose to refer to the fighting between the two nations as a "world war," (Appleby et. al., 2018). While not necessarily an incorrect statement, as France and Britain were among the strongest World Powers in the 1760s when this war occurred, the phrasing could be seen as attention grabbing, given the relation of World Wars to the United States. Aside from this point however, very little is said on the French & Indian War, with the McGraw-Hill excerpt summing up the entire conflict in less than a page.

The McGraw-Hill excerpt does make a point to touch on the horrendous debt incurred from the fallout of the war, noting that more than just paying for the fighting, there was also the matter of governing and defending the territories won from France as a result of the conflict. Stemming from this, the reading speaks on the Proclamation of 1763, enacted by King George III as a result of Pontiac's War; a series of skirmishes on the new borders of the nation, spearheaded by Ottawa Chief Pontiac, in reaction to settlers attempting to encroach on lands which the British had not claimed.

A topic that given heavy emphasis in the excerpt is the British reaction to smuggling in the colonies. Appleby et. al., several times throughout the section entailing the dissent within the colonies, writes on how Prime Minister George Grenville pushed for Parliament to allow for smugglers to be tried in vice-admiralty court in Nova Scotia. The reason for this being that instead of a typical colonial court, where jury members tended to be sympathetic towards smugglers, the admiralty court was run by British Naval Officers, had no jury, and did not adhere to British common law due to handling cases dealing with property, rather than people (Appleby et. al, 2018).

The McGraw-Hill reading continues to discuss the implications of the Sugar Act of 1764, as well as the public response to it. Appleby et. al. makes a point to describe how merchants and public saw this act as a violation of their rights as English citizens, as the act allowed any merchants goods to be considered illegal if the merchant in question was dealing with smuggling allegations, and furthermore allowed the seizure of property without due process, as it was considered contraband.

There is also a brief passage on the Currency Act of 1764, in which Parliament attempted to slow the rate of inflation by banning paper currency within the colonies. Appleby et. al. makes

a point to highlight the frustrations of the colonists who were affected by this, as many would use paper money to pay off their loans- this due to the fact that paper money's value rapidly depreciated, making it much easier to repay debts.

It is important to note that when Appleby et. al. previously put emphasis on a topic, it would get perhaps a little less than a page of discussion and coverage; therefore it may seem surprising that the Stamp Act of 1765 is given nearly two pages of coverage. The passage notes that this is the firsts direct tax to be levied on the colonists, and that news rapidly spread throughout the colonies, followed by resolutions from assemblies such as the Virginia House of Burgesses, and later demonstrations from groups such as the Sons of Liberty which formed in protest (Appleby et. al., 2018). The excerpt then explains that colonists ignored the Stamp Act when it was enacted on November 1st, 1765; opting instead to boycott British goods and refusing to import more until Parliament relented and repealed the act in 1766.

Given the utter failure of the Stamp Act, Britain's already dire financial situation worsened. Protests at home caused property taxes to decrease, and Britain still had troops stationed on the boarder of the colonies to fend off Native American skirmishes (Appleby et. al., 2018). All of these pressures, Appleby notes, lead to the enactment of the Townshend Acts of 1767; these acts reinstated taxes on many of the common imports that had been previously repealed, such as tea, paper, and glass. In addition, these acts not only renewed the trying of smugglers in admiralty courts but also made it easier for customs officers to find and arrest smugglers without due process (Appleby et. al., 2018)

Following the announcement of the Townshend acts, Appleby writes, the colonists were enraged. Immediately, the Massachusetts assembly began drafting a letter to the other colonies which criticized the British's actions. This letter lead to a warning towards, and subsequent

dissolvement of the Massachusetts assembly by British Government, which led to merchants in Boston and New York- and later Philadelphia- refusing to import British Goods to the colonies (Appleby et. al., 2018). Appleby also make a point of including a quote from a Samuel Johnson; a British writer who Appleby felt accurately summed up the British views towards the rapidly worsening climate between Britain and the colonies, “He that accepts protection, [agrees to] obedience. We have always protected the Americans; we may, therefore, subject them to government,” (Appleby et. al., 2018).

In addition to these shows of defiance, colonists began acting openly hostile towards British Officials and riots ensued, to the point that guards were required to be moved to Boston, as Customs Officers began to feel unsafe. Appleby notes how colonists continued to harass and antagonized the troops, by calling them names and throwing snow, among other things.

It was these shows of aggression that finally led to a breaking point; what became known as the Boston Massacre. Appleby comments on how colonial newspapers took part in gaslighting the public- by portraying the event as a cruel act of British tyranny- before ending the section by noting how British parliament repealed the taxes they levied, and further noting that the seeming peace that followed would be fragile and temporary (Appleby et. al., 2018).

OpenStax

The Corbett et. al. Openstax excerpt chooses to open in the wake of the French & Indian War, rather than briefly describing the events as Appleby et. al. had done in the McGraw-Hill excerpt. Corbett sets the scene by detailing the excitement which ran through both mother country and colony alike at the defeat of the, “...hated French Catholic menace,” (Corbett et. al.,

2014). Corbett claims that Colonial pride was running high and highlights this point by writing how colonists would joyously sing the refrain from, “Rule, Britannia!” (Corbett et. al., 2014).

Despite this atmosphere of merrymaking, Corbett is quick to paint the shadows looming over the British empire. Though the war had ended, French colonists and Native Americans still inhabited the frontier. While the British now controlled the French forts, they were uninterested in currying favor with the Native populace, and even less interested in supplying them with gunpowder and ammunition (Corbett et. al., 2014).

These souring relations between the British and Native Americans would soon lead to Pontiac’s War; which, in comparison to Appleby, Corbett recounts in much deeper- and more graphic- detail. The OpenStax excerpt writes on firsthand experiences which report terrifying acts of murder, dismemberment, scalping, and burning at the stake (Corbett et. al., 2014); these same stories would rapidly spread throughout the colonies, leading to a deep-seated resentment of Native Americans by colonists.

Such atrocities weren’t one-sided, however, as Corbett introduces the, “Paxton Boys;” a mob of Scots-Irish frontier settlers who assaulted and brutally murdered members of the peaceful Conestoga Natives and burned their houses. When Pennsylvania Governor, John Penn, moves the remaining Conestoga into protective custody, the Paxton Boys broke in and scalped all Natives inside the building (Corbett et. al., 2014). Corbett adds this chilling tale to illustrate the atrocities and tensions created by Pontiac’s War, which Appleby by comparison notes as a minor skirmish.

Another point which Corbett gives more detail to is the issue of the debt resulting from the French and Indian War. While Appleby does mention the issue of debt, Corbett expands on

the issue Britain was facing. In 1756, before the war, Britain was dealing with roughly £75 million for its national debt. In the wake of the war, this number nearly doubled to £133 million in 1763 (Corbett et. al., 2014). In addition to this, interest payments and the deployment of troops to the North American frontier continued to chip away at the British Empire's funds. It was a popular opinion at home, Corbett writes, that America should share the financial burden with Britain, given how much they had benefitted from the war (Corbett et. al., 2014).

The OpenStax excerpt also touches in slightly more detail on the Currency Act of 1764. More than just a straight ban, as Appleby claims (Appleby et. al., 2018), this act was a motion which prevented the American Colonies from printing more money, and furthermore required colonists to pay British merchants in gold and silver, as opposed to the fiscal currency they had been using, in order to standardize and stabilize the Atlantic trade (Corbett et. al., 2014). The issue for the colonists stemmed from silver and gold being a rarity in the colonies, as they dealt mainly in paper currency, meaning that their global funds were now much more depreciated in value (Corbett et. al., 2014).

A topic unique to the Corbett reading is the Quartering Act of 1765. Not mentioned at all in the Appleby McGraw-Hill excerpt, this act was enacted to give British troops access to housing in the colonies. The colonies required to provide public housing for the soldiers- such as barracks- however if necessary, soldiers were also allowed to take up residence within barns and other private lodgings (Corbett et. al., 2014). It was also required of the colonists to pay for their food, much to their chagrin. The quartering act was among the most resisted policies instated by Parliament, especially in New York, where the assembly refused to enforce the ruling (Corbett et. al., 2014).

As previously mentioned with the Appleby reading, several groups rose up to protest the Stamp Act of 1765, such as the Sons of Liberty, who held demonstrations and also attempted to threaten and intimidate officials (Appleby et. al., 2018). A group that Appleby does not mention by name, however, was the Daughters of Liberty.

The Daughters, as they were called, consisted of women who thought themselves British Patriots who were fighting to defend their liberty (Corbett et. al., 2014). These women protested the Stamp Act by boycotting goods produced by Britain, brewing their own teas from locally grown plants, and- perhaps most notably- creating their own homespun cloth instead of buying from Britain. Indeed, the wealthier members of the Daughters would host competitions to see who among them could spin the finest cloth (Corbett et. al., 2014).

In addition, Corbett writes, the Daughters were in fact the pioneers of the non-importation movement which Appleby also briefly touched on in the McGraw-Hill excerpt. However, instead of the insinuation that the movement sprung from colonial assemblies (Appleby et. al., 2018), it was in fact women who held the responsibility of obtaining goods for the home. Therefore, it was women who had the power to vote with their wallets by partaking in the boycott on British products, and encouraging others to do the same, leading to the rapid growth of the movement (Corbett et. al., 2014).

A final key difference that Corbett makes compared to the Appleby excerpt regards the Townshend Acts of 1767. The Appleby reading writes that the Townshend acts levied, “new [import taxes] on glass, lead, paper, paint, and tea imported by the colonies,” (Appleby et. al., 2018). The Corbett reading, however, expands on this and clarifies the point slightly, by explaining that these taxes were not directly levied on the colonies (Corbett et. al., 2014). Rather, Charles Townshend, the chancellor who enacted these taxes, had placed them internally on

Britain, in the hopes that it would not anger the colonies unlike the Stamp Tax which had levied them externally. (Corbett et. al., 2014).

Conclusion

A pre-conceived bias when beginning this project was the idea that the McGraw-Hill reading would be a simplistic read due to being a high school-level textbook, with very little- if any- depth. To an extent, this was founded; some topics touched on by the reading, such as non-import movement, appear to have been conflated with other information. In the case of the Quartering Act, some events were simply not mentioned.

It would be unfair, however, to claim that Appleby's McGraw-Hill excerpt is without merit. It is made more accessible than the Corbett OpenStax reading by virtue of being less wordy. In addition, it is important to remember that the Corbett reading is primarily utilized by college-level courses, even though it also sees usage in high schools.

This distinction is important to keep in mind as a college-level course is not held to the same binding curriculum that high school courses are. Two professors teaching with the Corbett book might focus on two completely different sections of the text, such as an American Revolution course compared to a World War II course, in which case it's then necessary to have materials which go into more depth on a given subject. High school courses, by comparison, are required by their curriculum to cover a wide array of topics over the course of a school year. This is especially important to remember as high school curriculums are required to give state-mandated standardized tests at the end of a school year.

The Corbett book, without a doubt, goes into more detail on its subject material than the Appleby book, exploring in great detail events that Appleby may only touch upon, or otherwise

omit altogether. That said, the question that must then be raised is the level of detail that should be expected of a high school-level curriculum, and the materials it uses to teach.

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