

PEDAGOGY OF COMPASSION

Abstract

This paper considers the philosophical and political implications of conveying a moral education within a classroom setting. Here, a moral education is understood as a way in which a student learns to practice compassion. The paper aims to identify the relevance of a moral education in three dimensions: within the philosophy of care community, public policymaking, and classroom textbooks. I argue that history lessons are a critical avenue by which students might understand and emulate compassion. At the same time, the paper points to the role of discourse in constructing a meaningful education. It identifies the ways in which classroom language communicated by the teacher or in textbooks might influence a students' moral education. Consequently, the major project at the end of the paper is to analyze paragraphs of elementary school history textbooks. Through this analysis, I provide hypotheses about the textbook authors' choice in phrasing and its consequent effect on students' engaging in a moral education.

Pedagogy of Compassion

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“‘First of all,’ he [Atticus] said, ‘if you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you’ll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view--until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.’”

–Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960)

In Harper Lee’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the reader accompanies the protagonist, Scout Finch, on her journey through a moral education. This bildungsroman explores the loss of childhood innocence. One instrument for the development of this theme is the relationship of Scout and Jem, the young protagonist and her brother, with their father, Atticus Finch. He maintains an active role in his children’s lives, devoting himself to instilling them with moral and social consciences.

The leitmotifs surrounding the moral education of Scout and Jem Finch raise questions about whether, on the most fundamental level, one can teach compassion. If it can be taught, the dilemma lies in whether school can play a role in effectively teaching students compassion. For Lee, there is a divide between the good values taught and reinforced by the parent, Atticus, and the schoolteacher’s unsympathetic and hypocritical lessons. Here, the parent is teaching the value of compassion while the classroom seems to be teaching the opposite. Because the home becomes the place where Scout is able to learn valuable lessons, the home takes on a potential role of the schoolroom.

Scout’s relationship development with people of diverse backgrounds shows that the most valuable lessons for Scout are those of empathy and understanding. This empathy is a quality that must transcend the fictional world of Maycomb, Alabama. A step back from the novel reveals the reality of American classrooms, where this piece of literature is read across the United States as part of the curriculum. In literature courses, students are asked to analyze Scout’s lessons in empathy, and examine the protagonist’s relationship development with different members of her society. In this way, the text becomes to the student what Atticus is to his children.

In the non-fictional world, humanistic outlets, like libraries, are shrinking and classrooms are increasingly geared toward technical workforce training. Consequently, studies of humanities and the quality of students’ moral instruction become diluted (Donoghue, 2012). Given the

reduction in literary outlets, our education system increasingly relies on other humanities disciplines like history. The history classroom can provide students with a visual into the lives of other people, and can bear some weight for adopting pedagogy of compassion.

History, in its broadest sense, is the story of humanity's past. In American classrooms, history becomes a story that explains the formation of American ideals to future generations of U.S. citizens. History's relative perpetuity in the classroom is because politicians and officials in charge of forming education standards and policy recognize the value of providing a future electorate and current citizenry with an understanding of American values (Ball, 1990). While the agenda of politicians and those in charge of curriculum can serve as a conflict of interest in the method of relaying past events to students, history as a text which speaks to the stories of others has the powerful capacity to deeply and personally resonate with students. A single-hour history taught in a school day holds the potential to transform the classroom into a provider of ethical and moral knowledge.

A Study of Compassion

Plato's *Protagoras and Meno*, a dialogue between Protagoras and Socrates discussing whether or not ethics can be taught, serves as a departure point for examining the issue of whether compassion truly can be taught to other individuals. In the course of the dialogue, Protagoras's argumentation takes the form of a blanket statement: everybody has some degree of respect for what is right. Protagoras determines social interaction can play a positive normalizing force on individuals' behavior. He argues that those, people who do not always behave in a good manner can be supplied with what it takes to allow them to be good "because we benefit from each other's respect for what's right, and from people being good to one another" (Plato, 2005). Protagoras's argumentation sheds light on the human desire to instill fellow beings with a moral compass. Without this desire, members of society would not feel an inherent need to pass on ethical values, let alone teach ethics in schools. A society based upon the limitations of the myth Protagoras describes—where all people have some sense of right and must subsequently watch out for one another in order to maintain a good community—would be the exemplar of a virtuous society.

Nevertheless, in the 1950s, character education disappeared from the American classroom. Philosophers, education officials, and those in charge of developing curriculum came to the consensus that virtue could not be taught directly to students as arithmetic or science are taught to pupils. Although the U.S. school system witnessed a gradual return of character education in school during the early 2000s, the reservations and doubts about the viability of character education persist (Leming, 1993).

These doubts are based on the failure of education to directly in-

culcate moral education. This attitude is unfortunate because it excludes the very real indirect education of empathy, which occurs in schools through the study of literature and history. Although empathy is not interchangeable with morality, compassion does offer key ingredients of morality. Michael Slote, a man widely recognized as a leader in the renewed field of virtue ethics, demonstrates the value of empathy above other moral structures like deontology and utilitarianism in his essay, "Caring versus the Philosophers." Slote takes the position that there are two forms of concern. The first form, touted by Nel Noddings, a philosopher known for her work in philosophy of education and ethics of care, "is essentially about relations with people with whom one is or will be personally involved." Slote proposes a second type of caring, a more humanitarian caring or concern about "people one doesn't know, distant people who are, say, sick or starving" (Slote, 1999).

It is the purpose of this paper to explore the means through which the current education system attempts to equip students with the second form of caring, a more humanitarian form of caring, and to examine whether an education in caring can be taught to students indirectly through history.

Shifting Political Understandings of the School

As the wheels of the Boeing 757 touched the ground, Hillary Clinton became the first Secretary of State to visit Burma; meanwhile, a teenager in Kansas sent a Facebook message to a newfound friend in India. The world is becoming smaller and less mysterious, but there is a new and relevant demand to prepare students to interact—vocationally or socially—on an international scale.

Our progressively global society requires participants in the global system to have the faculty to relate to people from all walks of life. In Martha Nussbaum's book, *Not for profit: Why democracy needs the humanities*, she argues that American education leaders response to an increasingly world market has been to mistakenly re-envision the school as a training ground for globally-minded professionals. For Nussbaum, this vision for the functionality and values of schools falls short of preparing students for a global community. Lawmakers in the United States cite a more technical, rigorous education as a pathway to solving socio-economic problems and ensure long-term competitiveness; however, this is a restrictive interpretation of the school and does not fulfill a holistic curriculum that would prepare students not only technically but also morally. A policymaker-framed education system may satisfy economic needs, but it fails to meet the social, relational needs of an international society.

If the main educational goal of the school shifts to nurturing students who can grow as competent and caring people, then the nature of

the school could fundamentally change. George Noblit and Van Dempsey's argument in *The social construction of virtue: The moral life of schools* indicates that a shift in the nature of the school would also require a more global shift in the public values and interests of the society within which these schools are couched (Noblit et. al., 1996). One example of a recent, society-wide reconceptualization of values, includes the post-recession era rhetoric about the purpose of schools. Since February of 2009, in every State of the Union speech President Obama has delivered, the case for investment in public education was marked by the usefulness of education to positive individual and national educational outcomes.

This reaction directly relates to society's value of the school as a technical institution. The school where students can be equipped with skill-sets necessary to join the workforce and eventually become an integrated cog in the workforce—this is the very definition of a technical enterprise. President Obama, in a speech entitled “Literacy and Education in a 21st Century Economy,” commodified the value of literacy and knowledge when he stated, “literacy is the most basic currency of the knowledge economy we’re living in today” (2012). His rhetoric about education has centered on what schools can do for job growth and the economy and rarely, if ever, raises the idea of the school as a place for a moral education.

Nel Noddings, a foremost expert in the ethics of care and education theory, provides her own theory of education, which she argues can satisfy the trend of a globalizing world. She suggests that the search for a more academically rigorous education as a solution to societal problems of today is unproductive. In support of her opinion she says, “poverty is a social problem and not an educational one” (Noddings, 1984). While Noddings position does help us to think about the role of compassion in education, she forecloses the idea that education can prepare students to solve larger, more systemic societal problems. Under Noddings' vision, an appropriate goal for the American educational system would be to pursue the production of people who are not only prepared in a technical education but also competent and caring people. For Noddings, the incorporation of a number of different intellectual identities creates for a less streamlined and more open society. Furthermore, if intellectual identities are interconnected to personal, racial, social identities, it may allow for students to better understand and care for others. Through Noddings' interpretation of education, it becomes evident that education is a social need (1995).

American schools have witnessed more than their fair share of federal efforts for system-wide reform from the 1994 Educate America Act to the 2000 No Child Left Behind Act. The perpetual cycle of misinterpretation of the school's purpose and subsequent failure to achieve educational goals may change if society begins to expect different results from schools. It is time to refabricate schools as fundamentally moral enterprises.

Discourse as a Framing Mechanism

“Frames are just structures of thought that we use every day. All words in all languages are defined in terms of frame-circuits in the brain. But, ultimately, framing is about ideas, about how we see the world, which determines how we act.”

-George Lakoff (2012)

John Dewey, an American psychologist, philosopher, and education reformer, argues that teachers have relayed history to students—without emotionally relatable facts—as a representation of how American academics tend to contrive past events. If history is to serve as a conduit for a humanistic, moral education, authors and teachers need to respectively repurpose the way textbooks are written and discursively implicated in classrooms. Literature has the ability to instill very deep connections with students because characters of novels are so well developed they almost become real people. Hence a reading of the novel, *Harriet Tubman: Conductor on the Underground Railroad*, may more effectively convey the plight of Harriet Tubman than a reading of a history textbook’s three-sentence description. A narrative history that remains true to past events would better serve the purpose of imparting virtues of empathy. If George Lakoff, an American cognitive linguist and professor of linguistics at University of California, Berkeley, is correct, the way in which teachers and textbooks frame history lessons can greatly influence how students see the world and how students interact with one another.

Because all curriculum-based learning in a school setting is conveyed through language, the discourse used by teachers and textbooks is perhaps the most powerful framing mechanism. Language is critically important because it is inherently the most rudimentary instrument used to instruct students; thus, the intricacies of classroom language inform students’ actions, attitudes, and mindsets (Potter, 1996).

Plato’s *Protagoras* substantiates this understanding of how discourse has the ability to tailor reality. The semantics utilized throughout the dialogue of Protagoras and Socrates to reach an understanding of whether ethics can be taught is indicative of how discourse can fashion reality and shape values. Socrates’s relentless interrogation of Protagoras underlines the need for cautious and purposeful discourse when conveying ideas and explaining arguments:

Socrates: Explain: is the idea that being good is a single quality, and that respect for what’s right, being sensible and religiousness are parts of it, or are these things that I’ve just mentioned all just different labels for one and the same thing? That’s what I’m still missing.

Protagoras: Oh, well, anyone could answer that one easily,
Socrates: being good is a single quality, and the things you're
asking about are parts of it.

S: Do you mean in the way parts of the face are parts—the mouth,
and the nose, and the eyes, and the ears—or more like parts of
gold, where the parts don't differ in any way either from one an
other or from the whole chunk, except by being bigger or smaller
parts?

P: I'd say in the first way, Socrates; same as the relation between
the parts of the face and the whole face.

S: So does that mean that people can get these parts of being a
good person separately, with some people having one part and
some people having another, or is the idea that if you've got one
small part, you're bound to have all of them?

P: No, not at all. After all there are plenty of people who are brave
but don't care about what's right, and then again plenty of people
who care about what's right, but lack knowledge.

S: Oh—so are those parts of being good as well, having knowl
edge and being brave?

P: Absolutely. In fact having knowledge is the most important of
all.

S; And each one of them is something quite distinct from the
others?

P: Yes" (2010).

In the dialectic, Protagoras' phrasing of his argument directly affects
Socrates' reactions. One might imagine a dialogue in which Protagoras
may have chosen different phrases to articulate his perspective, which, in
turn, would have yielded a different line of questioning from Socrates and
yielded a different conclusion about moral education. At the end of the
discussion between Protagoras and Socrates, Protagoras argues against his
own position; this ultimate confusion provides perspective on the impact of
semantics.

While it is arguable that Plato's work did not reveal a solidified
solution on the specifics of what it means to teach ethics, the rhetoric and
phrasing used in pursuit of an answer is a deciding factor of both what the
final truth will be and how we perceive and utilize the final truth. Protago-
ras's confused articulation highlights the need for cautious and careful
rhetoric in sharing knowledge. Such caution must extend to classrooms—
without which, students may be left with skewed impressions of reality. If
history is one of the few schoolroom spaces where students are exposed to
the stories of others and learn lessons in compassion, it is incredibly rel-
evant to pay painstaking attention to the implicit rhetoric of history lessons.

The impactful role of discourse in the conversation between Protagoras and Socrates naturally translates to the spectrum of public education in the United States. The layered discourse of education policy can reveal much about how specific lessons are taught and why they are taught. Movements in education from the far Right and the far Left and anywhere in between have played a significant role in shaping the discourse used in classrooms and in textbooks (Spring, 2010). For instance, the Texas Board of Education, one of the largest buyers and sellers of history textbooks in the nation, determines how students interpret the world by changing the rhetoric and information incorporated in textbooks. From replacing the term “capitalism” with the phrase “free-enterprise system” to refusing to admit sections of information about Latino figures of historic value as role models for the state’s largely Hispanic population, the Texas Board of Education has effectually reshaped a unique understanding of United States history (McKinley, 2012).

Various actors within the realm of public education in the United States push their respective educational agendas. When politicians developed national standards in the 1990s—in order to protect traditional American Values in schools—academic standards for history classes were the most contentious issue. The debate over history standards mirrors broad divisions in political philosophies; the ongoing contention also holds implications for how compassion education might be carried out in the history classroom. In particular, this action by the highly conservative Texas State Board raises fundamental question about the nature of the motivation to alter textbook language. There is a push to maintain a favorable attitude in students towards the existing capitalist structure and white-male-dominated history. The movement to conserve the content of histories rooted in patriarchal backgrounds reveals an additional complexity in the textbook publishing industry.

While the words we choose can negatively affect the pursuit of teaching students compassion, this problem becomes magnified if the framework relies on exclusive, violent power structures. The ambition of teaching compassion—and more specifically understanding how Protagoras’ notion of a shared sense of right and wrong is developed in the United States—is uniquely tied to a Western history of dominance and colonialism (Andreotti, 2011). Sylvia Winter, a Professor of African and Afro-American studies at Stanford University, famously bemoaned the pervasiveness of Western culture in history classrooms across California when she stated, “[the history framework in California] does not move outside the conceptual field of our present essentially Euro American cultural model” (Andreotti, 2011). This model leaves no room for comprehending the plight of minorities in U.S. history and ministers a very streamlined education to students.

States like California have grappled with this systemic problem by producing additional features textbook publishers should include in existing textbooks. The goal of this revision of texts was to produce a better quality textbook. The revised textbook framework called for reflections of “the experiences of men and women of various racial, religious, and ethnic groups” (California State Department of Education, 1987). This rethinking of the purpose and content of history has changed content of our schoolbooks over time, but has not surpassed textbook discourse’s roots in patriarchy and colonialism. Changing the content of history texts through a simple revision or add-on of the plights of persons’ other than white males or American ideals does not effectively reshape the framework upon which history is written. This is because movements such as these become co-opted into an inherently dominant power structure. Histories of females, minorities, and ethnic groups do not possess their rightful independence and value; instead they are perversely built into the existing patriarchal history—this movement is explained as a fulfillment of the “white man’s burden” rather than a valuable story telling of humanity (Cooks & Simpson, 2007).

The valuable story telling of humanity is further obscured by a national focus on instilling youth with American values through history education. The entangling of a nation’s account of its history with its national scruples is not unexpected, but does raise a separate hurdle in the pursuit of teaching students empathy. American tradition in the United States has maintained an ideal of rugged individualism, and many Americans believe poor people inflict poverty upon themselves (Clark, 1997). The presence of this mindset, a conception of class hierarchy, in a student’s history textbook may undermine lessons in compassion a student may come across while reading about the projects or New York ghettos of the 1930s and 40s. This ideal of American rugged individualism extends to a value of American exceptionalism that has manifested itself in an obviously hegemonic classroom curriculum.

A record of hegemonic rhetoric in this country’s view of itself and its position of power in the world has not escaped the classroom. For example, in the United States, unlike most countries students are only expected to be proficient in English. This unipolar determination of what students need to learn will determine the discourse of its future. Consequently, a quandary arises. Can an honest attempt at preparing students to be virtuous be successful if the very framework this pursuit functions in undermines the ability to achieve this goal (Spivak, 2012)?

An Investigation of the Classroom

“A look into a kaleidoscope yields a view of shards of colored glass and sand reflected by six identical mirrors. The beauty of this instrument lies in each turn of its tube-like frame because after every twist striking patterns emerge. Textbooks are indeed a kaleidoscope, and we should not see them as being a single image or even a single refraction of the light of instruction. How we view them depends on who we are, what our view of curriculum and instruction may be, and what our view of knowledge and learning may be.”

-Alan C. Purves (1993)

An analysis of the rhetoric of widely circulated history textbooks reveals the influence of Western philosophy and the West’s history of colonialism on the contents of the American education system. John Dewey, a prominent education reformer, discussed how a study of the past is germane to understanding the present by describing the past as a “history of the present.” If the way American historians depict the past informs current social dynamics, then flawed historical understanding could mislead students’ development of caring relationships. For example, Dewey lambasts some historians’ descriptions of indigenous people of the Americas (Dewey, 1976). For Dewey, these descriptions do not display the social relationships or aspects of “primitive” life and, thus, all that is understood about entire groups of people are emotionally un-relatable facts and figures.

If history textbooks are frame past events to optimize for teaching compassion, the text’s rhetoric must be re-evaluated. More specifically, reformers must advocate for a form of education discourse that reaches beyond the most rudimentary facts and fairly sentimentalizes social and cultural aspects of a history. Noddings, in her philosophy of education, confirms this method of learning can result in an education in compassion.

In formulating recommendations for reshaping textbook rhetoric, I analyzed four different U.S. History textbooks. In each of these texts, I took note of the way in which the textbook relayed information about the Native Americans in the pre-colonial and colonial eras. In my study of the textbooks I looked specifically at the historians’ portrayal of white settlers, native peoples, and the encounters between settlers and indigenous people. I look directly at the historians’ discursive practices, including word choice and semantic choice, as a means of assessing the historians’ descriptions. Through this discursive analysis, I provide first-hand reactions of how the descriptions might fall short or succeed in evoking compassion within the reader.

My enquiry began with *The Story of America* written by John A. Garraty in 1994. Garraty began the book with a note to the student that is very reflective of John Dewey’s thoughts on history as a reflection of the

present:

It [The Story of America] may be read as a grand lesson that permits us to understand how past affects present. Our story is composed of many pasts that allow us to explain how our present experiment in democracy has gone on for more than 200 years. Thus we read history knowing full well that those who study the past can come to understand whom we are and how far we've come and are sometimes able to caution us about our present course toward the future.

Garraty does not adhere to Dewey's thoughts on what a history text should include—displaying social relationships in order to “cultivat[ing] a socialized intelligence” that is conscious of the multiplicity of dynamics inherent in a group of people. In this paper, I stress the importance of Garraty's theory of history: “the use of history [should be] for cultivating a socialized intelligence” in order to educate students about people who they may never encounter. This process serves to instill students with empathetic feelings toward the people they are studying. In this way, histories of real people are not reduced to another national standard. Histories take on living, breathing characteristics.

Nevertheless, when Garraty describes the pre-colonization era in the United States, he uses language that undermines the project of providing an education in forming compassion for the other. Throughout his description of how Plains Indians were forced off of their land, there is no nuance of compassion—there is no acknowledgement of the sacrifice made by the Plains Indians. In fact, he labels this section “Removing the Plains Indians.” Synonyms of the word remove include discard, get rid of, purge, and expel. Objects of the word “remove” and its synonyms are generally objects we consider disposable. This objectification perpetuates a subtle notion that Native Americans are not only subhuman but also expendable. The following section of Garraty's Unit 1, “The First Americans,” further reveals rhetorical whitewashing of Native people's history:

In the early 1850s settlers began moving into Kansas and Nebraska. After the Mexican war, promoters planned to build railroads to the Pacific through the newly won territory. They demanded that the government remove the Plains Indians from this territory. In 1851 agents of the United States called a meeting of the principal Plains tribes at Fort Laramie, in what is now Wyoming. The agents persuaded the Indians to sign the Fort Laramie Treaty. The Indians agreed to stay within limited areas. In exchange the government would give them food, money,

and presents. This new system was called concentration. It was a way of dividing the Indians so that they could be conquered separately.

This section of the history book is rather deceptive in its use of language. Subtleties of the passage such as “The Indians agreed to stay within limited areas. In exchange the government would give them food, money, and presents” makes what happened to the Native Americans seem fair to a reader who has no background knowledge of mass atrocities. Garraty entitles this process “concentration,” a word that is most infamously connected to the concentration camps of the Holocaust—one of the most horrific genocides of history. Garraty is not explicit here in labeling the “removing of the Plains Indians” what it actually was, a mass atrocity. His failure to be explicit reinforces a colonial tradition of apathy towards the systematic and deliberate destruction of a racial group in the United States.

This inefficacy to overtly label the decline of Native Americans as a mass atrocity does not end in Garraty’s *The Story of America*. *The American Journey: Building a Nation*, written by Joyce Appleby, Alan Brinkley, and James McPherson in 2000, is a history textbook that spans over the early Americans to just beyond the Vietnam era. While *The American Journey* was published six years after Garraty’s book, it makes many of the same rhetorical mistakes inherent in Garraty’s text. Perhaps one of the major failures of this textbook is its description of the conquering of Native Americans; there are almost no facts provided that describe details of how Native American culture was harmed or disadvantaged as a result of the conquistadors and the settlers. Appleby’s, Brinkley’s, and McPherson’s work, intended for students within fourth, fifth, sixth or seventh grades, introduces the concept of oversimplification in textbooks.

In the spring the Spaniards heard rumors of rebellion. To crush any spark of resistance, they killed Montezuma and many Aztec nobles. The Aztec had had enough. They rose up and drove the Spaniards from Tenochtitlan. Cortes, however, was determined to retake the city. He waited until more Spanish troops arrived, then attacked and destroyed the Aztec capital in 1521.

If building compassion for others requires an enriching and vivid learning experience, then history textbooks must meet the challenge of sharing a complex history to readers: no matter how young the student might be. The Appleby, Brinkley, and McPherson passage’s simple language and sentence structure used to describe Cortes and the Aztecs does not merit the label “history.” Bill Honig, a member of the California State Board of Education, explains how such superficiality in textbooks is common

when “books do not look beneath the surface” or elucidate the motivation, consequences, and relevance of the history presented (Altbach, 1991). Simple language fails to supply readers with detail necessary to understand the past; often, oversimplification comes at the cost of cutting adjectives and modifiers, which are a key resource when attempting to establish an emotional, resonating connection with the reader. An explanation for this ostensibly inept description of history is the textbook writers’ reliance on readability formulas—mathematical equations used to determine sentence length and vocabulary (Ambruster, et. al., 1985). Frequently, readability formulas result in meaningless prose instead of valuable, engaging history lessons.

While *The American Journey: Building a Nation* (2002) serves as an example of the harms of over-simplified history, Boorstin and Kelley’s text, *A History of The United States*, serves as an example of an inappropriately embellished history. The authors of this text begin the book by providing a frame of reference for what the student may encounter throughout the rest of the history text. Boorstin and Kelley do this by not only including a prologue, but also including a two-page background on the pictures and paintings that were selected for the text. The prologue successfully represents Dewey’s concept of the past as a history of the present when it states, “Discovering America is a way of discovering ourselves. This is a book about us.” The entirety of the prologue functions as a framing mechanism to reveal to the reader that the book will describe why society is the way it is.

While the prologue aims for a realistic portrayal of American history, an analysis of the actual content of the book reveals the authors’ own biases. For example, in the section below, describing European exploration of the Americas, the author employs slanted rhetoric. This representation of glory in history begins with the history of Hernando Cortes and the Aztecs:

Perhaps the most courageous and successful conquistador was Hernando Cortes. In 1519, the same year Magellan set out on his voyage, the bold 34-year-old Cortes landed on the coast of Mexico with 550 soldiers, 16 horses, and 10 brass cannon. Within a year he had subdued the Aztec empire. He won by bravery, ruthlessness, skill, luck, and the help of imported European diseases which killed thousands of Indians. Cortes arrived in a ship larger than any seen there before. Riding on horses, the Spaniards seemed superhuman. Their guns killed at a distance with terrifying magic. No wonder the Aztecs thought they had been invaded by gods!

This excerpt from the text, entitled “Cortes and the Aztecs,” was supposed

to be a history of both Hernando Cortes and the Aztecs. An initial reading of the text highlights expletives and positively connoted adjectives to describe Cortes' activity. This semantic choice serves as a fanfare for Cortes and reveals little to nothing about the Aztec people. Here the text sacrifices the enrichment of the student for a vivid regaling of the past. The listed nouns, "bravery, ruthlessness, skill, luck, and the help of imported European diseases," make it seem as if ruthlessness is perhaps the same thing as bravery. Also, the addition of the phrase "and the help of imported European diseases" fails to describe the fact that 25 percent of the overall population was decimated by these imported European diseases. The language of the text contextualizes the diseases as a useful tool in allowing Cortes to accomplish a mission—a modern day Cortes would likely be accused of bioterrorism. A student's over exposure to such insensitive discourse is worrisome because it could inculcate apathy instead of compassion. The excerpt from "Cortes and the Aztecs" does not assimilate writing from the Aztecs or give a personal face to the depiction of a pre-colonial Native American. This 'personal face' is important because it facilitates students imagining themselves in another person's shoes or stepping into the skin of another and walk around in it.

The American Nation written by James Davidson and Michael Stoff in 2003 incorporates insight into the 'personal face' of Native Americans by describing who Native Americans were as people, not just as objects to be "removed" in order to fulfill a greater aim of colonization. As evidence, the prayer below, included in the textbook, is just one segment of insight into a deep, cultural respect for nature by pre-1600 Native Americans.

We have come to meet alive, Swimmer,
do not feel wrong about what I have done to you,
friend Swimmer,
for that is the reason why you came,
that I may spear you,
that I may eat you,
Supernatural One, you, Long-Life-Giver, you Swimmer.
Now protect us, me and my wife.

A series of subheadings in the chapter entitled "Before the First Global Age (prehistory-1600)" further substantiate the authors' efforts to offer of a detailed recording of the social and cultural factors of Native Americans' lives—factors which readers are more likely to relate to. Some of the aforementioned subheadings include "Culture Areas of North America," "Cultures of the Far North and Plateau Regions," "Cultures of the Northwest," "Cultures of the Southeast," "Shared Beliefs," "Respect For Nature,"

and “Special Ceremonies.”

Within the scope of my study, *The American Nation* offers a text that seems to meet the educational goals of producing both compassionate and technically prepared students. The authors’ foreword note is exemplary evidence of this aim:

People often say that we live in an interdependent world. Being interdependent means that nations rely on one another to achieve their goals... The insights of other social scientists help historians understand how the environment affects people’s lives, how the past is linked to the present, and how the pursuit of wants and needs influences human behavior. Today more than ever, understanding how these forces interact can help us choose careers, create new forms of music and art, and preserve and protect the environment” (Davidson et. al., 2003).

The authors’ cognizance of the need to understand “the pursuit of wants and needs,” “how the environment affects people’s lives,” and their consequent effect on choosing “careers,” creating “new forms of music and art” and preserving “the environment” is a sensitivity required in the framing of a textbook. Studies confirm about 90 percent of time spent instructing is based on instructional material, especially textbooks (Altbach, 1991). Since these books play a central role in students’ educations, authors have a substantial mandate to revise their writing, checking for cultural sensitivity.

Within my pool of analysis, recently published textbooks revealed a greater sensitivity to framing a multicultural-perspective than older textbooks. Still, both newer and older texts lacked an introspective section, addressing the authors’ intentions behind using certain language and rhetorical strategies. For example, there is no explanation of why indigenous people to the United States are labeled as ‘Native Americans’ or ‘Indians.’ A framework for the historians’ discursive practice may encourage students to acknowledge word choice and assess the impact of word choice on textbooks’ descriptions. Joy Harjo, a Cherokee poet and author of the Native American Renaissance, distinguishes this tradition of labeling all indigenous people as one of the major linguistic problems in the telling of Native American history. Harjo clarifies, “I don’t use the term ‘Native Americans.’ ... It is a term born in the university. ... There is no such thing as a Native American. We all belong to tribal nations and call ourselves by those names” (Harjo, 2001). Because the term ‘Native American’ is an academic term born of the university, it is appropriate for textbooks to incorporate this language; however, the textbooks’ disregard towards the story behind what indigenous people prefer to be called is another manifestation of colonialism—where the colonized lose their voice and become co-opted into

the society of the colonizers.

My subsidiary investigation into the language used in textbooks reveals that writers must present information that does not distort reality through simplification and does not confuse students through detail or complexity. Regrettably, many of these texts fail to adhere to these standards. Writing for children and teenagers in most cases is imperfect. Accordingly, teachers should teach texts with the same level of caution used by authors in producing these texts and by Socrates in phrasing his interrogation of Protagoras. Without a skeptical mind, a teacher easily falls into the trap of understanding the textbook as a multi-dimensional tool—a fact my study of textbooks has proven to be false.

Textbooks are just one mode of communication and knowledge output; they must be understood as one of a number of sources to be drawn upon by teachers (Nichol & Dean, 2003). History cannot be understood through a single medium, a textbook; history is a compilation of books, news articles, archival records, artifacts, oral accounts, printed documents, and personal records. Because teachers often restrict teaching past events to information compiled in a textbook, information encompassing a wide variety of distinct sources is lacking in the classroom. Accordingly, much of the story of humanity's past is also absent in the classroom.

From History Texts to A Student's History

Throughout this essay, I argue that historians' discursive strategies impact the minds of those who are immersed in it; I have shared with any reader of this essay the relationship between text and reader as hierarchical, where all of the power lies in the text's ability to shape the minds of those who dare to read it. Together, we have delved into how the nuances of education discourse might shape a student's move from innocence to adulthood, from indifference to compassion. Conversely, this view of the student as a receptacle of knowledge with no ability to interact with his or her education does not articulate the complete story of a student's scholastic journey. From Nel Noddings' philosophy through Michael Slote and John Dewey's works, this essay has presented facets of relevant education philosophy. However, each of these prominent thinkers does not administer a discussion of the student's experience as an active learner (Noddings, 2002).

Perhaps, the reason a discussion of the role of the student as an active agent is missing is because the American education system has been historically designed for students as passive actors. Take, for example, the traditional classroom style, in which a lecturer stands at the front of the classroom and students copy down the lecturer's dictations (Davis et. al., 2008). As a student along with any reader of this paper, whom I would argue is also, in some sense of the word, a student, we know this conclusion

may be false. As students, we have the ability to not just receive input, but also to challenge said input, to notice language and reject or accept notions insinuated by said language.

Production of a fair and accurate textbook is difficult; production of a perfect textbook is impossible. Every authors' audience limits their writing and research, including school administrators, scholars, teachers, interest groups, political groups, and personal biases. In addition, publishers of textbooks cannot be realistically expected to produce flawless accounts of history, and, as a result, classrooms cannot be counted on to be equipped to persistently furnish students with the moral education expected of global citizens. Consequently, students must be equipped with the ability to think critically about the information they are provided. Developing critical thinking skills in students may also contribute to the educational goal espoused in this paper: producing a technically knowledgeable, compassionate and caring population.

Critical thinking is not an accessory of compassion or care, but a tool necessary to prepare students to properly engage with texts and imagine themselves in the shoes of their subject matter. As Martha Nussbaum, philosopher of political philosophy and ethics, puts it, students should have the capacity to “[raise questions] about differences of power and opportunity, about the place of women and minorities, about the merits and disadvantages of different structures of political organization” (Nussbaum, 2010). Only this process of engaging and empowering students will break down colonial structures of the past; only this evolution in a student's role will redeem humanity's story. Our global society demands a more empathetic and ethical populace, so too must our students demand instruction in recognizing right from wrong, good information from faulty information, and fair discourse from colonial or misleading rhetoric.

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