Why Textbooks Cannot Fulfill the Goals of a College-Level History Course

Most college professors agree in general terms about what we want first-year college students to learn from a survey class. We want our students to learn "critical thinking skills," how to read primary documents, how to assess different interpretations of the past, and how to write about them. We want students to learn how to make sense of information and assemble it into coherent analyses. We also want to students to get a sense of how differently other people lived in the past, of how the world (or at least the part covered by whatever subject we're teaching) has changed over time, of the processes driving change and how to make sense of them.

Of course, we also want our students to learn specific material – in a survey, the broad outlines of the history of a general time and place. No one would disagree that a survey of Western Civilization since 1500 should include the Reformation, the French Revolution, the rise of industry, colonialism, and World War I. Yet while we all agree about the broad outlines of what happened in these events, we disagree quite strenuously among ourselves about why these events took place and about what they mean. Most of us, I assume, hope to impart this sense of historiographical debate, without using that word, and perhaps with an emphasis on our own particular interpretation – but nonetheless with the idea that students must get a sense of how difficult it is to make sense of the past, and of how much professional historians are studying a very live subject, not one which is dead, over, known, and consigned to the past.

Most history professors attempt to accomplish these goals by assigning traditional textbooks put out by big publishers. Yet even the best textbooks, by definition, fail miserably at imparting what we want students to learn. Textbooks provide students with a prepackaged set of information. Students, understandably, assume that history professors want them to learn the facts in the book. This very process discourages students from thinking about causality – the causes of events and processes are laid out for them in the textbook. It discourages them from learning how to make sense of information – the book has already made sense of it. It discourages them from making their own analyses – the book has analyses, already laid out. It discourages them from thinking about the debates among historians – the best textbooks might mention different interpretations, but their narratives almost always support one way of looking at the key events of the subject under study.

Also, and this is just as important, we want students to feel the excitement of learning about history. History is interesting because it's about people, their stories, their lives, their ideas, the things they tried to accomplish (whether they succeeded or failed), the deep differences among their outlooks and worldviews. Yet textbooks are inherently boring and by their very nature have an extremely difficult time getting students excited about history. History writing is not inherently boring. But because textbooks are written to be bland and uncontroversial, and because they are written to cover everything in a topic, they cannot impart the excitement of learning about history that drew us all to the field in the first place. This is why so few students ever actually read a textbook (and, I would wager, so few professors read them either).

Elite colleges already know this. No one assigns a history textbook at the University of Chicago or Amherst College. Is prepackaged "knowledge" good for our students, but not for "smart" elite students, or do we also want to teach our students to think?

Alternatives

There are many alternatives to the traditional textbook. All of them require assembling a set of course materials that focus on the things we think are important, that are crafted to encourage students to learn how to assess sources, and that are linked to assignments that help students learn to make sense of a wealth of information. These course materials can also help students learn the specific material we want them to learn and can potentially make them excited about learning history.

Obviously, a textbook-free course does not mean a reading-free course. Rather, teaching this type of course requires carefully choosing what readings to assign. Nor does it mean pretending that our students are all stellar readers and writers, ready to dig into the most difficult primary sources with no introduction. That is simply not the case at most colleges in this country. Finally, it does not mean abandoning the survey concept altogether, though it does mean emphasizing some concepts, events, and processes at the expense of others. Of course, all textbooks and instructors already do this – but the textbook free course design will help instructors do it intentionally.

One alternative to the textbook that works quite well is to assign a series of relatively short trade books, sometimes supplemented by outside, open-source primary readings or videos that can be provided free of cost on the internet (through Blackboard or another platform). This is the approach followed in the original second half of Western Civilization course outlined here. This course has been used for a number of years, and works much better for me than the old textbook model did. The students do the reading more, they understand key concepts better, they are more likely to get excited about history, and their writing is much better as a result.

Another approach is to assign relatively few trade books, and build a course around short, mostly primary and some secondary materials. This is the approach used for the original U.S. history since 1945 course on this site. These materials include speeches, personal accounts, television programs, documentaries, chapters of books by historians or journalists, court decisions, House proceedings, and oral histories. Of course, constructing this type of course requires more work, but it is extremely rewarding because it gives instructors the chance to decide what they really think is important, and it also allows students to learn how to assess and compare materials written from different perspectives.

These courses also require different types of assignments than traditional, textbook-driven history courses. I do not assign tests, since again I do not want students to memorize information. Rather, I require students to write something, either a short reading response or a paper, on every assigned piece of course material. This does potentially mean more grading than a traditional course. Yet it also really allows an instructor to help students learn how to think about the material, how to make sense of it, and it also holds them accountable for the assigned readings or videos. I also assign each student a day when they are responsible for formulating discussion questions on the readings. These questions are often far from perfect. But they help students learn to think about what is really important in what they are reading, and how to make connections among assigned course materials.

This method also requires giving students background information and filling in the gaps from your own knowledge. But because lecture is not a repeat of what is in the textbook, students pay much more attention and I actually find myself lecturing much less.

There are some drawbacks to this approach. All of these assignments require more preparation in class than a traditional textbook would. They also require more guidance in class to help students understand, draw out the meanings of what they read, learn to assess, compare, and draw their own conclusions. Yet this extra work pays extra dividends.

Despite the examples provided, this project is not aimed at giving an alternative, textbook-like, prepackaged course. It is aimed at providing some ideas of how to organize a textbook-free survey course – which is, after all, the only exposure to history that the vast majority of undergraduates will ever get.

Leaving the textbook behind is inherently easier for some subjects – the United States since 1945 – than others – the first half of the Western Civ or World History survey. This is because some subjects are much more immediately accessible to first year college students. Yet with proper guidance, some pedagogical thought, and a reshaping of class discussions and the use of readings, it is possible to abandon the textbook in every survey class, replace it with a combination of interesting secondary and primary sources, and actually teach students to think.

I have now been teaching textbook-free for about a year. This method is not perfect. But **I am never going back.** It is much easier to get students involved and engaged. They learn **much** more – both about the material we are studying, and about how to think. Their papers are much better. Some students object at first to being forced to think for themselves. But in the end, the learning outcomes are far superior to those I got with a textbook.

How To Use This Project

This project is designed to be used **however you want**. One advantage of ditching the textbook is that you can emphasize the things you think are important, the assignments that you think students get the most out of, and abandon the pretense of covering absolutely everything. The disadvantage is that you have to become an expert in every subject you cover. But in fact, you don't – you can draw on your colleagues who are themselves subject experts, even without assigning their textbooks.

If you want to keep a textbook and use a module from here – feel free! If you want to grab a syllabus wholesale and teach from it – that is fine too! And just as importantly – if you have a module or complete syllabus that you would like to share, please send it along!

And of course, if you have any thoughts or feedback, stories about how this project has worked or not worked in your classes, please share them. This project is designed to start a conversation, not end it. Let's stop unthinkingly assigning pre-packaged course materials, and start figuring out how to assign materials that will help our students learn what we want them to learn, whatever those turn out to be.