



educating for cultural literacy
and mutual respect

Creating Inclusive and Equitable Communities – A Call to Action

*Understanding the origins and impact of bigotry in the
U.S. today and what we can do about it*

Lesson 5: Dominant Narratives in Education

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Introduction

While textbooks and other curricular material are often presented to students as objective sources of truth, this lesson encourages students to critically engage with the information they learn in textbooks. Textbooks and other curricular materials are not written in a vacuum but are rather the products of real people with their own experiences and biases. Therefore, Lesson 5 introduces students to dominant narratives in textbooks that contribute to the persistence of prejudice and racism.

In this lesson, students will learn about the political and economic forces that shape textbook representations. Students will be prompted to question what they learn in textbooks rather than to take the information for granted.

Theme: Systems of Power

Disciplinary Area: General Ethnic Studies

Ethnic Studies Values and Principles Alignment: 3, 4, 5

Relevant Curriculum Standards

California's [Literacy in History/Social Studies Standards](#):

- **Reading Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies: RST.11.12.1; RST.11.12.2; RH.11.12.7; RH.11.12.8**
 - Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.
 - Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.
 - Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.
 - Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.
- **Writing Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects: WHST.9.10.1; 9.10.4; 9.10.9**
 - Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content.
 - Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
 - Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Background Information for Educators

In almost every classroom, teachers utilize textbooks or other textual material to shape students' perceptions of their own identity and how they relate to the people around them.¹ These textbooks (history textbooks in particular) do not contain impartial truths, however. Rather, educational materials are the products of political, social, and economic forces and are written by real people with personal interests.² Further, state-adopted history and civics textbooks often use dominant narratives to foster nationalism and patriotism amongst students.³

In an attempt to evoke pride in students' country, textbooks often present a country's legitimized narrative of history, seeking to "create loyal citizens around a shared collective identity."⁴ James W. Loewen has argued that American history textbooks tell feel-good stories of national heroes and omit information that might tarnish the United States' reputation in order to foster pride amongst

¹ Michael Apple and Linda Christian-Smith, *The Politics of the Textbook* (Routledge, 1991).

² Ibid., 1-2.

³ Robert Lerner, Althea K. Nagai, and Stanley Rothman, *Molding the Good Citizen. The Politics of High School History Texts* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995).

⁴ Vincent Greaney, "Textbooks, Respect for Diversity, and Social Cohesion," *Promoting social cohesion through education: Case studies and tools for using textbooks and curricula* (2006): 50.

students for their country.⁵ These “feel-good stories”, however, often only focus on wealthy, white, male figures while glossing over America’s violent and racist past.⁶ Further, when textbooks do feature members of ethnic minority groups, the representations are riddled with stereotypes and biased language.⁷

This lesson is designed to help students recognize the common dominant narratives about ethnic groups in textbooks so that they can be prepared to engage with narratives they encounter in the future.

Learning Objectives

Identity: *How will my instruction help students learn something about themselves and/or others?*

- Students will be able to recognize how formal education shapes their views of and attitudes toward themselves and others.

Skills: *How will my instruction build students’ skills relating to the content?*

- Students will be able to conduct content analyses of dominant narratives in textbooks.
- Students will be able to analyze an academic article and extrapolate key takeaways.

Intellect: *How will my instruction build students’ knowledge and mental powers?*

- Students will be able to recognize and critique bias in widely-used textbooks.

Criticality: *How will my instruction inform students’ views of power and equity and the disruption of oppression?*

- Students will be able to identify whose voices are often missing in textbooks.
- Students will be able to explain how nationalism and capitalism impact textbook representations.

Guiding Questions

1. How does education shape our views of others?
2. What roles do nationalism and personal biases play in shaping textbook representations?
3. Whose stories are usually told in textbooks, and whose voices are missing?

Key Concepts and Terminology

- **Stereotypes** - beliefs and opinions about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviors of members of various groups.

⁵ James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York, NY: New Press, 2008), 5-6.

⁶ Cynthia Greenlee, “How History Textbooks Reflect America’s Refusal to Reckon with Slavery,” August 26, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/identities/2019/8/26/20829771/slavery-textbooks-history>.

⁷ Tim Walker, “Educators Call Attention to Racist Stereotypes in Textbooks, Impact on Students,” National Education Association, August 28, 2016, <https://www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/new-from-nea/educators-call-attention-racist-stereotypes-textbooks-impact>.

- **Bias** - an attitude of favor or disfavor toward something or someone.
- **Nationalism** - identification with one's own nation and support for its interests, especially to the exclusion or detriment of the interests of other nations.

In-Class Activities

1. **The Hook** - Divide the class into groups of 3 or 4 students (or pairs) and ask groups to discuss how they normally use textbooks in their classes. How is the information in textbooks presented? Have you ever questioned the information in your textbooks? Bring the class back together and lead a discussion about their answers. If this issue is not brought up by the students, explain that textbooks often present information as objective facts. However, this lesson will help students to be critical consumers of the information they read in textbooks because these books are written by people who are also susceptible to internalizing and reproducing dominant narratives.
2. **Main Activity and Discussion** - Play the NPR Code Switch podcast [“Behind The Lies My Teacher Told Me.”](#) Ask students to take notes on the Cornell Notes Sheet (page 7). After the podcast, lead a discussion about James Loewen’s main arguments. Use the Discussion Questions (pages 4-5) to guide the conversation.
3. **Reflection** - Return to the questions you posed for students during “The Hook” at the beginning of the lesson. Has their approach to reading textbooks changed at all? How will they go about reading in the future? You may also want to open up a larger discussion about the role of formal education in often perpetuating the status quo. As the article they read for class argued, textbooks and other curricular material often present a rosy picture of America’s history and avoid confronting instances of racism and bigotry. Despite this, education can also be a tool for progressive change if students learn to critically engage with the information they read.
4. **Extension Activities** - Here are some ideas for further student exploration:
 - Students may be interested in analyzing the dominant narratives of Arabs in textbooks. Provide copies of the [“Textbook passages about Arabs”](#) handout if students would like to conduct content analyses of these narratives.
 - Ask students to read the HuffPost article [“American Kids are Learning Islamophobia from their Textbooks”](#), which explains the political and economic forces that shape textbook portrayals of Arabs and Muslims.
 - Students read the BBC article [“Publisher apologises for ‘racist’ text in medical book.”](#)
 - Students read the New York Times article [“How Politics Plays Out in Textbooks.”](#)

Discussion Questions

1. How did people react to James Loewen's textbook in the 1970s? Why did they react like that?
2. What does Loewen argue about opinions and facts? Do you agree with him?
3. What does Loewen argue are the consequences of learning inaccurate or biased historical accounts? What are some other consequences that he didn't mention?
4. What role does capitalism (or the desire to make profit) play in textbook representations (think of Loewen's discussion of Texas)?
5. Think about your own experiences in history classes. How has the history of race and different ethnic groups been covered in your textbooks?
6. How can you use the information from this podcast to shape how you approach your textbooks in the future?

Homework

Ask students to skim the textbook they use in their U.S. or world history class and identify dominant narratives about minority ethnic groups in the book. Students should choose a textbook passage they find to be problematic and rewrite the passage based on their own independent research.

Assessment, Application, Action, and Reflection

- Refer to step 3 of the In-Class Activities section

Additional Resources

- Loewen, James W. *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*. The New Press, 2008.
- National Council for the Social Studies, "The Status of Black History in U.S. Schools and Society" by LaGarrett J. King - https://www.socialstudies.org/system/files/publications/articles/se_810117014.pdf
- Stanford History Education Group - "Historical Thinking Chart" - <https://sheg.stanford.edu/history-lessons/historical-thinking-chart>
- National Council for the Social Studies, "Problems of Bias in History Textbooks" by Michael H. Romanowski - <https://www.socialstudies.org/sites/default/files/publications/se/6003/600310.html>
- Zinn Education Project, "Teaching Critically about Lewis and Clark: Challenging Dominant Narratives in K-12 Curriculum" - <https://www.zinnproject.org/materials/teaching-critically-lewis-and-clark>
- Indian Country Today, "'All Indians Are Dead?' At Least That's What Most Schools Teach

Children” by Alys Landry - <https://indiancountrytoday.com/archive/all-indians-are-dead-at-least-that-s-what-most-schools-teach-children-6Hk8Ahn0EG0dsV4MssWcg#:~:text=%20At%20Least%20That's%20What%20Most%20Schools%20Teach%20Children,-Alys%20Landry&text=It's%20time%20to%20break%20out%20the%20construction%20paper%20and%20synthetic%20feathers>

Student Worksheets

Cornell Notetaking Sheet

NPR Code Switch Podcast “Behind The Lies My Teacher Told Me”

Date:

<u>Key Words</u>	<u>Notes</u> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. How did people in Mississippi react to James Loewen’s textbook in 1974? Why?2. According to Loewen, what is America’s biggest lie?<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Why is it a lie?b. How does it impact high school students?3. According to Loewen, what is the question students should ask about any source?4. Why is Texas important to “textbook wars”?
<u>Questions</u>	<u>Key Takeaways</u>