

Utilizing Discourse Analysis to Disrupt Traditional Narratives in High School Social Studies Courses

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Abstract: Discourse analysis recognizes the power of language to deliver messages in subtle ways. Language used in tertiary sources like Social Studies textbooks and review guides is subject to discourse analysis. Applied to tertiary sources, discourse analysis teaches students to examine neutrally phrased textbooks written about the past by curriculum developers in the present. High school students can critically analyze traditional texts to increase culturally responsive education in their own learning and improve their chances of passing standardized assessments that increasingly focus on contextualization, critical thinking, and historiography. Required textbook readings provide ample opportunity for teachers and students to apply discourse analysis to traditional classroom materials to create lessons rich in critical thinking and comprehensive course content.

New York State’s Education Department committed kindergarten through twelfth-grade public schools to culturally responsive education with the Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education (CRSE) Framework of 2019. In this document the state recognized past inequalities and systems that have advantaged some groups and disadvantaged others, stating that inequities must be “clearly understood” (CRSE, 2019, p. 6). Understanding inequities related to background, gender, race, and other categories is an important responsibility in Social Studies classes, where past political, social, and economic developments are the content pillars in mandatory Global History and United States History courses.

A popular learning activity in Social Studies education is deep analysis of primary sources. Students learn content and historical analysis methods, such as point of view and role of the audience, in this activity. New York State (NYS) recently adopted analysis protocols from the College Board, such as assessing point of view, audience, and purpose in primary source documents. Beginning in June 2019, these strategies were required on the redesigned NYS Global History Regents standardized examination (NYSED, 2022). To succeed on this exam, students must contextualize historical messages, think critically, and engage in historiography.

This emphasis on analyzing primary sources in Social Studies courses is presented as a deeply critical activity. However, analyzing primary sources from diverse groups is not nearly enough to “directly challenge” (CRSE, 2019, p. 6) inequities. There are systemic oppressions embedded in tertiary information materials. These learning materials, unlike primary sources, are presented as neutral, without a point of view or purpose. Freire (1993) wrote about this in his acclaimed book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, explaining that an oppressed pedagogy occurs when an oppressor’s perception of reality, which is a subjective reality, is presented as the one, true reality. Subjectivity masquerades as objectivity. This practice still occurs in modern Social Studies textbooks and other standardized Social Studies instructional resources. For example, a seemingly generic passage on slavery in a review book is not a highlighted primary source that presents for consideration the perspective of a historically important author. When reading such nonspecific material students are not analyzing information from a critical lens. Rather they are uncritically absorbing that as information; and both student and teacher might unknowingly continue the cycle of passing down oppressed histories. Freire (1993) wrote, “The teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable” (p. 44). Many

purportedly objective textbook passages present reality precisely in this way. Rather than rejecting or casting off these sources, which is unrealistic, there is an opportunity here for teachers to use discourse analysis to leverage these sources for both critical analysis and knowledge building.

Researchers at New York University's (NYU) Steinhardt Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools recently analyzed the content in Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (HMH) English Language Arts resources (Khan et al., 2022). HMH is a popular textbook company which is why this recent report from NYU takes a close look at materials published by HMH. The findings of the study in regard to what the researchers called 'culturally destructive curriculum' are alarming. In summary, the research found that HMH failed to meet standards of culturally responsible curriculum; they superficially included mixed race and identity folks in their stories, while absolving culprits of historic power struggle and oppression (Khan et al., 2022). For example, a section on World War II internment camps glossed over who was responsible for displacing millions of American citizens in the 1940s — It was the United States government that was responsible, by the way. — and instead focused on the survival and endurance of Japanese Americans. Khan et al. (2022) found that White Americans were allowed to feel and experience emotions in a diverse array of situations in HMH texts. Nonwhites were relegated to complying with and overcoming their struggles, while the cause-and-effect realities of those struggles were dishonestly obscured and omitted. While NYU conducted a deep dive with multiple and diverse researchers in a college research setting, classroom teachers can also introduce this method of analysis to their students. High school students can critically analyze traditional texts to increase culturally responsive education in their own learning. Discourse analysis is how teachers can make this happen in their classrooms.

Discourse analysis takes seriously the power of language to deliver messages in subtle ways. For example, in his book on methods of discourse analysis, Fairclough (2003) explains that researchers can analyze three things: process, the representation of concrete and abstract events, and the inclusion and exclusion of certain developments. There are many layers to this analysis, such as the use of nouns versus pronouns, the use of past and present tense, and the use of the timeless present to shift accountability. The best way to illustrate is with an example. Fairclough (2003, p. 149.) wrote that "they lost their jobs" and "someone fired them" deliver different messages. "They lost their jobs" is an intransitive statement; it presents the situation as somewhat inevitable and absolves the responsibility of the employer. "Someone fired them" is transitive and recognizes responsibility. Although these two sentences may seem interchangeable, the difference lies in how the power dynamics are situated. These subtle word choices matter because they convey important realities to teachers and students.

Teachers themselves are products of their educational environments (Marx & Larson, 2013) and, therefore, teachers alone may not be able to uncover where oppression exists in seemingly neutral spaces, like textbook passages. I was a political science major in college and, when I began teaching Regents US History and Regents Global History to New York City high schoolers, I did not feel entirely prepared to construct lessons from the 1500s to the present. Yes, I had conducted deep dives into specific topics during graduate school, like immigration in the United States in the 1920s. Yes, I wrote a 20-page paper on "The United States in Latin America during the Cold War" for my bachelor's degree. However, I was unprepared for the vast array of content required to plan units crossing centuries in US History and crossing millennia in global history. As a result, I relied heavily on tertiary sources of information like textbooks and review

books. I had to learn the basics as quickly as possible in order to adequately plan lessons each day for 180 days. Many Social Studies colleagues share my reliance on review books to obtain content overview, especially in their early years of teaching survey history courses. For these reasons it seems wise to think about retooling Social Studies teaching materials for easy use of critical discourse analysis in class discussion. However, traditional textbooks are already filled with unintended opportunities for critical discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is one method that high school teachers and students should be encouraged to employ to disrupt the dominant, oppressive narrative that continues to find expression in tertiary sources about history.

Teachers can employ discourse analysis strategies with students and challenge them to find more examples of oppressive discourse as they read and process lesson content in ways required to pass the contextualization, critical thinking, and historiography challenges on the Regents exam. Discourse analysis becomes critical in nature when it assumes that the power dynamics between different groups might still be present in what is being uncritically accepted as objective spaces. Amsco's popular textbook guide, *Advanced Placement Edition World History: Modern [1200-present]*, is a core source of information for students and teachers (Cox et al., 2022). While this review book is aligned with the nine units of the AP World History: Modern course (College Board, 2023) and is helpful for newer teachers grappling with so much content, the language in certain sections contains oppressive discourse that is centuries old. For example, Unit Four in the College Board's AP World History: Modern curriculum covers the global slave trade across the Indian and Atlantic Oceans from 1450 -1750 (College Board, 2023). One of the excerpts from a section about cash crops and forced labor reads, "Sugar cultivation in Brazil demanded the constant importation of African labor. African laborers were so numerous in Brazil that their descendants became the majority population in the region" (Cox et al., 2022, p. 211). A question for students could be: Can sugarcane speak and ask to be cultivated? The answer, of course, is no. Sugar cultivation does not and cannot demand anything. Rather the demands were made by Spanish *conquistadores* that, for their own profit, stole the land by claiming it and enslaving Native and African people to grow sugar. Another example from the same section states, "Because of the *engenhos* ' [slaves'] horrible working conditions, plantation owners lost from 5 to 10 percent of their labor force per year" (Cox et al., 2022, p. 211). Even though the sentence recognizes the poor quality of the working conditions, the verb "lost" still utilizes the dominant perspective. The loss of labor for conquistadores is the focus of the sentence, rather than the dehumanization, enslavement, and torture of human beings. 'Lost' is not a higher level, technical historical term, but rather a basic verb that even small children use in their vocabulary. That simplicity serves to obscure its power in this context. In further analysis of this sentence, these people were not lost, they were forced to labor in deadly conditions. They were killed.

In a Global History Regents review book (Goldberg & DuPré, 2018), the section on the Mexican Revolution excluded the full depth of the United States' relationship with the long-standing government of Porfirio Diaz, who ruled Mexico from 1884 to 1911 and permitted United States businesses to invest and profit from Mexican resources. A sentence reads: "The [Mexican] wealth went to a small upper class as well as to foreign investors" (Goldberg & DuPré, 2018, p. 18). One of those investors was the United States, with two billion dollars of wealth tied up in Mexico (Schoultz, 1998). But that is not mentioned anywhere in the review book in the section on the Mexican Revolution. The meeting between President Taft and Porfirio Diaz which occurred in 1909 was also excluded from the review book. In this meeting, President Taft was hoping to ensure the viability of the Diaz administration as revolutionary sentiment was

growing among the exploited classes of Mexicans (Schoultz, 1998). The exclusion from discussion of those economic and political relationships among the Diaz government, the US president and US businesses, prevents students from connecting the dots and understanding that the United States government, for fear of interference with US investments and US profits, was actively seeking to subvert revolutionary activity in Mexico. A subsection of the review book on Pancho Villa mentions his alliance with peasants in his fight against economic imperialism, reading: “When the United States supported the Mexican government against Villa, conflict erupted across the border between Villa and the United States government in 1916” (Goldberg & DuPré, 2018, p. 18). Using discourse analysis, students can dissect the intentionality of the passage by analyzing the verb “supported” as one that denotes positivity. Its use in this sentence serves to obscure the role of the US government in obstructing progressive action in Mexico. The same situation with a reverse verb might read: “The United States *opposed* the efforts of a revolutionary leader fighting for the rights of his people against an oppressive dictator allied with foreign powers, mainly the United States.”

Discourse analysis recognizes there is not one true perspective on reality, but rather historical studies rely on an incomplete collection of multiple perspectives. This methodology changes the nature of Social Studies education. By including discourse analysis techniques, students can think critically about texts beyond the primary sources to the primary texts that are carefully curated for them by curriculum writers or state boards of regents. Critical analysis of the curriculum as they study it makes students active participants in a truly student-centered classroom, which New York State advocates for in its culturally responsive framework. Disciplinary permission to critically examine required textbook readings is just the sort of encouragement many teachers need to live up to state standards regarding culturally responsive instruction.

The addition of discourse analysis to the high school classroom is significant because educators across the state have pledged to involve students more actively in discovering the complexities of the past. Teachers are employing historiography with primary sources, but there is further space for students to interrogate texts beyond the curated canon of primary sources. Analysis of tertiary sources is different from primary source analysis because it focuses less on authors and point of view and more on interrogating the use of language to convey a dominant point of view currently in existence. This strategy is also accessible to all students because the language examined in discourse analysis is straightforward with basic tier one level words, such as “lost” and “supported,” as illustrated in the examples above. With basic directions, explanation, modeling, and examples from their teachers, students can apply discourse analysis to discover more perspectives and critically examine how historical developments are presented to them by the required curriculum. History class becomes a conversation about the past, its expression in the here and now, and our plans for (re)writing future understandings of it.

The use of discourse analysis is an accessible option to empower students to pass the Regents exam and to change (their understanding of) the world. It employs critical thinking and creates spaces for students to be partners with their teachers in historical research. As students understand and employ discourse analysis, they are also understanding that point of view is everywhere. As Freire (1993) wrote, a dynamic pedagogy is “not content with a partial view of reality, but always seeks out the ties which link one point to another and one problem to another” (p. 47). Perspectives live and breathe in curricular spaces that have for centuries been unwarrantedly presented as objective. The practice of discourse analysis can teach students to

examine not just the inflammatory speech of some popular autocrat from the past, but also the neutrally phrased textbook in front of them written in the present by some curriculum developer. Tertiary sources may not be purposely asking to be analyzed when they purport to present the impossible idea of “One Truth.” However, the impossible idea of the “one truth” traditional textbooks try to perpetuate is pedagogically important because it is exactly what creates the universal possibility of using discourse analysis in high school Social Studies courses to disrupt traditional narratives about history.

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