

2-1-1990

# Fact and Fiction: Personalizing Social Studies Through the Textbook-Tradebook Connection

Maria Ceprano  
*St. Bonaventure University*

Eleanor B. English  
*St. Bonaventure University*

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## Recommended Citation

Ceprano, M., & English, E. B. (1990). Fact and Fiction: Personalizing Social Studies Through the Textbook-Tradebook Connection. *Reading Horizons*, 30 (2). Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons/vol30/iss2/8](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol30/iss2/8)

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Fact and Fiction:  
Personalizing Social Studies  
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Textbook-Tradebook  
Connection

**Maria Ceprano**  
**Eleanor B. English**

*Long ago when I was just learning to read and the world was on the brink of war, I discovered that if I wanted to look for the truth of what was happening around me and I wanted to know what made people tick, who made the events I couldn't control, the place to look for truth was in a story. Facts simply told me what things were. Story told me what they meant.*

Madeline L'Engle ( Norton, 1988)

Writing of her response to people and events brought about through fiction, Madeline L'Engle, renowned author of books for children and young adults, suggests the contrasting effect of expository and narrative writing on the students' understandings about what they have read in the social studies. Exposition is the explicit, reportive-type writing in which a large number of facts and concepts are compactly presented in an unembellished, depersonalized style; social studies textbooks contain this style of writing. Students often find it difficult to react to exposition, because this mode fails to provide the personal and meaningful connection to a world and a people with whom the students can identify.

Narration or story-type writing, as found in historical and multi-ethnic fictional tradebooks, on the other hand, is that artistic form created for evoking images, ideas and feelings in

addition to presenting accurate facts and settings. In *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, Donelson and Nilsen (1989) note that literature, used within the social studies context, frees students to travel vicariously to other times and places, and helps them to recognize that members of the human race, regardless of where or how they live, have more similarities than differences. In the narrative model, readers approach the facts of history by involving themselves in a personal way with the lives of people in the pages: "...it is through exciting adventures, life-and-death struggles, heroic, tragic and heart-warming incidents, that they move towards an appreciation of the external facts" (Britton, 1965).

In addition, fiction allows the readers to share the thoughts and feelings of another person; the character seems to speak to them with a "personal voice" (Britton, 1965). Provided with a perspective of the inner sentiments of the main characters, usually individuals like themselves, the students can more closely identify, internalize, and empathize with the characters and their efforts to cope with or resolve problems forced upon them by the events within the historical or ethnic situation. This concern for the characters makes the surrounding contextual events more illuminating and more interesting to the students. The personal interaction with the fictionalized characters is the key in facilitating the students' knowledge and attitudes about the past and the peoples of other cultures. Personalizing the expository facts of the social studies through literature can make the unembellished facts more meaningful to students of all ages.

### **Illuminating facts through fiction**

It is suggested, therefore, that teachers provide students with opportunities to bridge facts — the textbook — with fiction — the tradebook — to foster a clearer understanding

of social studies concepts, such as culture, empathy, pluralism, and interdependence, and skills, such as gathering and using data, recognizing cause and effect, and developing constructive attitudes toward diversity (Weaver, 1988; Fleming and Weber, 1980; State University of New York, State Education Department, 1982, Elementary; 1987, Secondary).

A passage from a recently published social studies textbook for middle grade students illustrates the value of the textbook-tradebook connection. The authors present the important concept of segregation, as it related to school segregation in the South during the late 1930s, with a brief mention and a limited development:

*In practice, separate facilities were almost never equal. School buildings for black children, for example, were often old, poorly equipped and supplied with out-of-date books. Even if the facilities were exactly equal, Marshall pointed out, "the very fact of segregation establishes a feeling of humiliation and deprivation in the group considered to be inferior."* (Brown and Bass, 1986)

This allusion begs for elaboration of a heartfelt understanding of the concept of segregation and the effect on the lives of the individuals who were, and are, the victims of prejudice. The tradebook, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1976), vividly dramatizes the concept as it portrays the effects of segregation on the character, Little Man, with whom the reader can identify. We pick up the story as Little Man ponders over the soiled and time-worn textbook his teacher has only moments earlier forced him to accept:

*...as he stared at the book's inside cover, his face clouded, changing from sulky acceptance to puzzlement. His brow furrowed. Then his eyes grew wide and he sucked in his breath and sprang from his chair like a wounded animal, flinging the book onto the floor again. "Now, just what's*

*gotten into you, Clayton Chester?" But Little Man said nothing. He stood staring down at the open book, shivering with indignant anger. "Pick it up," [the teacher] ordered. "No!" defied Little Man. "No? I'll give you ten seconds to pick up that book, boy, or I'm going to get my switch..."*

Reading further, students discover that inside the cover was a record of the date of issuance, the condition of the book, and the race of the student to whom the book was issued. From 1922 to 1933, the book, which was judged from new to average to poor, was given to a white student. Eleven years later, when the book was assessed as *very poor*, it was deemed proper for the "nigra" student.

In this passage, the readers can recognize the cause of Little Man's anger because they come to empathize with his frustration over the insult to his self-worth and dignity. Little Man's encounter with forces beyond his control makes the concept of segregation become alive and meaningful to the readers.

Historical and multiethnic literature abounds with opportunities to personalize the facts presented in social studies textbooks throughout the grades. The concept of war, when taught utilizing the fact and fiction bridge, can answer the critics' demand "for a more enlarged view of history that will teach how everybody lived, not just soldiers and statesmen, not just the winners, but ordinary people..." (Donelson and Nilson, 1989). The tradebook *When Hitler Stole the Pink Rabbit* (Kerr, 1971), presents a view of the social upheaval of the World War II years which elementary students can understand. Anna, the main character, is only nine years old when she begins to face the effects of an oppressive government. Following the detainment of her father by the Nazis, she and her brother are rushed out of Germany by their mother to Switzerland, a strange country with a strange language.

Eventually the family is united, but they are now poor. All of their possessions have been confiscated by the Nazi government. What this feels like, from the viewpoint of a nine-year-old, is described most effectively in the episode in which Anna realizes that even her most treasured toy, Pink Rabbit, has been taken along with all the family possessions. The book shows how events of that era affected those Jews who, though fortunate enough to escape the worst horrors of the holocaust, still suffered from the consequences of war. Since these events center around a character with whom the children can associate, content information is reinforced and critical evaluation regarding the events can be enhanced.

Middle school students can easily relate to the problems that beset Elvira, the twelve-year-old heroine of *Summer Of The Zeppelin* (McCutcheon, 1985). The story is set in a small village in Suffolk, England during the spring of 1918. Elvira is burdened with responsibilities stemming from her father's departure to fight in the "war to end all wars." Elvira's mother must take an outside job to support the family, and she expects the young girl to take over extra chores. The carefree life of childhood has gone; she finds herself catapulted into the adult world, facing adult decision-making situations. This is brought clearly into focus when Elvira and her friend discover a young German soldier hiding in an abandoned house. Although he is friendly, he is still the enemy, and Elvira is faced with a dilemma. Should she report him to the authorities or not? Reading this story, students gain insight about the effects of war on the personal lives of those on the home front, and also come to the realization that good people, worthy of esteem, can be found on both sides of a conflict.

To accompany the textbook's factual recounting of armies and battles, secondary students may read historical "war

novels," in which the authors are interested in the physical and psychological results of war on the characters (Donelson and Nilson, 1989). *The Last Mission* (Mazur, 1979), for example, follows teen-aged Jack Raab who, filled with dreams of personal heroism and glory as a pilot, lies about his age in order to join the Air Force. Jack's delusions are shattered when he is shot down and captured, and sees his buddies die. Reflecting about his war experiences, Jack tells a group of high school students that war is not like the movies, filled with fun and songs, but is about violence and death, with millions of ordinary people besides the combatants being killed. This action-packed narrative, with its sensitive treatment of the major character's change of attitude, can capture students' interest while providing accurate background facts concerning World War II.

An emotional response to a fictional character's experiences can illuminate factual accounts of an era. The devastating effects of the Civil War on the people and the countryside of the Confederate South have been dramatized for readers over the years through the account of Scarlett O'Hara's escape from the burning city of Atlanta in *Gone With the Wind* (Mitchell, 1936).

### **Textbook-tradebook resources**

The first task that teachers face in bridging fact and fiction is the selection of an appropriate matching tradebook that complements important concepts from the textbook. While this may seem a discouraging obstacle to social studies teachers who are unfamiliar with the literature for children and young adults, a variety of reference materials are available in most libraries which can aid in the search and selection of appropriate tradebooks. For the young reader, these may

include various editions of *The Bookfinder* (Dreyer, 1988) which is published every three years, and such indices as *A Guide To Subjects and Concepts in Picture Book Format* (Yonkers Public Library Children's Service, 1979); *Children's Books of The Year*, published annually (Child Study Children's Book Committee, 1987); *Gateway to Readable Books* (Withrow, Carey and Herzel, 1975); and the bimonthly *Horn Book Magazine* (Horn Book, Inc.), which also includes a section on "Stories for Older Readers."

Some sources that could help in the selection of books for older readers include: *Booklist* (American Library Association, published monthly with book reviews, see "Books For Young Adults" section); *The ALAN Review* (The National Council of Teachers of English, published three times a year); *Your Reading: A Booklist For Junior High and Middle School Students* (James and Davis, 1988, annotated according to students' interests); *Junior High School Library Catalog* (Isaacson and Bogart, 1985, published every five years); *Books For The Teen Age* (Office of Young Adult Services, 1988, published annually); *Books For You: A Booklist For Senior High School Students* (Abrahamson and Carter, 1988, published every five years, with each title accompanied by a brief annotation). Of course, the most important and readily available source of information about books specific to grade levels is the school librarian.

### **Criteria for book selection**

Once a book which matches textbook content has been found, the teacher must assess the book in relation to these criteria: Are the time, location, and people authentically recreated through dress, speech, modes of housing and transportation, and correctly depicted for the historical period? Are the book characters three-dimensional and so



believable that they come alive as humans with whom the readers can identify? Are the beliefs and values of the characters true to the time period? Is the theme as worthwhile and relevant in today's society as it was in the historical period being represented? (Norton, 1988). Are the illustrations detailed and historically accurate? The students "...must come away with the feeling that they know a time and a place better. It is as if they lived in it for at least a few hours" (Donelson and Nilson, 1989).

Tradebooks can expand upon textbook content which calls for knowledge of peoples in different cultures. Books in the multiethnic literature genre must also be evaluated using these criteria: Does the book extend the students' view of the world and the diversified people around them? Does the book project people as unique individuals with their own thoughts and emotions rather than as representatives of a particular racial or ethnic group? Is the culture of a racial or ethnic minority group accurately portrayed? Are the characters from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, educational levels and occupations? When a multiethnic book is set in America, are the characters, both in the text and in the illustrations, recognizably African-American, Hispanic, Asian, or Native American? (Norton, 1988).

### **Guidelines for using tradebooks**

Teachers who are unaccustomed to the process of integrating literature with textbook readings may find these general guidelines to be useful. At the elementary level, begin reading the tradebook to your class several days before initiating a textbook unit. Make special note of main characters, emphasizing those human strengths and frailties with which students can identify. Refer to the illustrations that give the students a visual image of the setting of events to be

studied. This will create interest in the unit topic as well as provide background knowledge of the content to be studied.

When reading longer books, do so in installments that are appropriate to the attention spans of the students. With youngsters in the primary grades, this may translate to five to ten minutes per reading, one or two times a day; older children may have a fifteen to twenty minute reading, usually until the end of a chapter so as to pique their interest for the coming installment.

Intermediate grade, middle school and secondary school students may be directed to a variety of books dealing with the topic that are available in the library. The books chosen would be read before entering into a formal unit lesson. Sufficient time should be provided to allow the students to read and discuss their chosen books.

A Character Grid is a useful technique which may be employed with each book read. Students note on the grid all the qualities of each major character under headings such as physical and emotional characteristics, education, occupation, strengths/weaknesses, likes/dislikes, conflicts, resolutions. Preparation of the grid helps students become more adroit at character analysis, and illuminates the historical background and the social forces that influence the characters and their actions as well.

Once instruction from the text begins, it is useful, at all levels, to design a series of questions to guide textbook-tradebook discussions. The questions should emphasize not only recall, but higher level thinking: questions which require analysis, synthesis and evaluation. This will help the students make the connection between the facts presented in the text

and the more detailed events and characters presented in the narrative. Discussions should foster the development of inferring as well as critical thinking skills.

Since the foundation of social studies understandings are laid at the elementary level, emphasis should be placed on a variety of activities that can extend and reinforce the textbook-tradebook connection. To promote reading comprehension, encourage pupils to do further independent reading by creating a reading center in the classroom that features other tradebooks centering on the unit topic. Reports on these books may be given orally so that all the students can share the learning. Listening and speaking skills can be enhanced by having the pupils formulate questions they might ask the characters encountered in the text and tradebooks. These questions can be employed in mock interviews with different students cast in the roles of interrogator and historical or ethnic character. Interviews may be staged as radio broadcasts or television talk shows where all the students can participate as questioners or reactors. Book reviews can be written, collated and bound in book form to keep permanently in the reading center. Pictures of the characters and the setting can be drawn accompanied by pertinent captions. Original sequel stories, created as a whole class, small group, or individual activity, can describe how the tradebook character would react when faced with other situations. Poems and plays may also be written about the character and the historical events.

Both the text and the tradebook can be used as sources of information about the traditions of ethnic groups. In addition to the activities noted above, an ethnic fair may be planned, based on the readings, with students recreating the customs, songs, dances, art, and foods of the groups under study.

Consultants from ethnic groups should be involved in the planning for such an activity. In teaching about native Americans, teachers should select tradebooks that emphasize the unique lifestyles, customs, and tales of the varied tribes. *The Gift of the Sacred Dog* (Goble, 1980) and *The Friendly Wolf* (Goble and Goble, 1974), and de Paola's *The Legend of Bluebonnet* (1983), among others, are appropriate choices.

## Conclusion

To personalize the social studies for students, textbook units of study should be accompanied by well-chosen related fictional readings, through which character identification can illuminate historical events and provide understanding of our multiethnic culture. This textbook-tradebook connection will result in a better understanding of textbook facts. Teacher-directed activities focusing on the fictional stories can reinforce concepts, attitudes, and skills in the social studies for students at all grade levels.

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*Maria Ceprano and Eleanor B. English are faculty members in the School of Education at St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, New York, where Dr. Ceprano teaches courses in Reading and Language Arts, and Dr. English teaches courses in Children's Literature and Social Studies.*