

New Curricular Approaches to Teaching About the Middle East and North Africa

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This paper explores the possibilities of engaging in cross-disciplinary research to generate social studies curricula that disrupt singular historical constructions about the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), specifically for US high school teachers and students. As part of a larger multi-sited study that investigated and analyzed the common categories used to describe and teach MENA in US World History textbooks, the team engaged in multidisciplinary scholarship on the region to (1) review and analyze the five most widely adopted high school World History textbooks in the US; (2) share analyses with researchers and experts in the fields of MENA studies, history, and religion; (3) synthesize and integrate innovative scholarship on the region for potential curricula; and (4) generate robust alternative curricula for Grades 9-12 teachers. The authors, consequently, consider how educational research spurs innovative and culturally relevant curricular interventions for high school teachers. We argue thorough analysis of existing textbooks, informed by deep understandings of contested versions of historical events, should undergird social studies curriculum development. We suggest multidisciplinary and transnational collaboration can inform curricula in order to respond critically to singular narrations of peoples, cultures, and histories of a region.

Key words: textbooks, global studies curriculum; collaboration; culturally relevant pedagogy; multiple perspectives, Middle East and North Africa, praxis

Introduction

This article explores how engaging in cross-disciplinary research can generate innovative and culturally relevant curricula aligned with disciplinary and Common Core Standards (2014) for US high school teachers and students. As part of a research team that investigated the ways in which the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are described and presented in the most commonly used US World History textbooks, we describe the process of textbook analysis, share the findings from the study, and illuminate ways in which curricula can respond. We take stock of the possibilities of educational research to spur innovative curricular interventions in direct response to our research findings. Rich analysis of existing textbooks, informed by deep understandings of contested versions of historical events, should undergird curricular development that prioritizes: (1) student engagement with primary source materials, (2) a critical analysis of power relations in the narration of history and selection of

sources, and (3) student familiarity with multiple and differing perspectives on social and political realities. This case study suggests such curricular intervention is bolstered by interdisciplinary and transnational collaboration with other scholars in order to respond critically to singular narrations of the peoples, cultures, and histories of a region.

One major goal of this project was to develop curricula and lessons for high school teachers on MENA, so they could teach more deeply about specific categories, ideas, and topics in history. This culminated in the curriculum *Rethinking the Region: New Approaches to 9-12 U.S. Curriculum on the Middle East and North Africa*, designed in such a way that teachers also could consider topics and perspectives often excluded from textbooks and integrate alternate methodologies and approaches into their teaching. The purposes and objectives of this paper, however, are not limited to sharing our process, findings, nor our ensuing curricular interventions. We seek to generate dynamic discussion about the theme of our research. Given the misconceptions textbooks, popular media, and other sources promulgate about the MENA region (Abu El-Haj, 2008), we shed light on the multiple realities, truths, and experiences of the region, and share culturally relevant and anti-racist practices and curricula that can interrupt mainstream discourses. The use of primary source materials in the *Rethinking the Region* curriculum is important in this respect as they provide students and educators with opportunities to engage more fully with MENA cultures, politics, and history. These resources allow an in depth study of the region's vast artistic, scientific, and cultural production. Since the curriculum is aligned with US Common Core Standards Initiative (2014), we demonstrate the possibilities of remaining standards-conscious rather than standards-driven (Sleeter, 2005), thus allowing educators to move beyond prescriptive textbooks and scripts and to teach in more nuanced and accurate ways.

Broader Context for *Rethinking the Region*

The recurring narratives persisting in elementary and secondary World History curricula in the United States, mostly told through textbooks, often occlude realities as much as they reveal. Broad categories are used to frame the teaching of World History. These categories include descriptors such as civilizations, nations, religions, and regions that tacitly suggest monolithic identities rather than heterogeneous, multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies. While these categories often serve as organizing tools to describe peoples, places, and phenomena, they also generate and reify fixed notions of identity. Categories, in turn, may inappropriately marginalize some communities and peoples, distinguishing them as intrinsically alien or different from the dominant culture; thus, they function to mask the ways in which broader societies and wide regions have historically shared practices, cultural concepts, and societal norms. To take one timely example, oversimplification of categories often results in the conflation of the history of the Middle East with the history of Islam (Beydoun, 2013; Jamal & Naber, 2008; Said, 1979; 1997). Curricula and writings more responsive to the region's diversity of traditions would explicitly correct the assumption that Islamic and Middle Eastern history is synonymous. Numerous traditions—from Manichaeism to Zoroastrianism to Christianity and Judaism—have longer histories in the Middle East than Islam does, which itself has a varied and multifaceted past within and beyond the Middle East.

Being attentive to both the diversity of cultures within themselves, and to connections across segments of society requires nuanced approaches to the shared material, linguistic, and social worlds of peoples and civilizations. This multifaceted approach entails undermining inherited assumptions about civilizational difference and cultural uniformity in order to question the authority of given categories and to understand how the formation of those categories reflect specific and contingent cultural traditions. This approach may be thought of as thinking with categories of analysis, as opposed to taking categories

or broad civilizational divisions for granted and somehow being built-into historical development.

Our research-based curricular project analyzes the common categories used to describe and teach about the modern Middle East and North Africa in existing US World History textbooks, and uses this research to offer robust alternatives for Grades 9-12 social studies teachers and multicultural educators to integrate new scholarship and curricula on the regions. Understanding the modern Middle East and North Africa is also a constructed category (Goffman, 2002; Mazower, 2006). We seek to provide a more nuanced approach to the region than what is presently offered by reviewing how textbooks describe and frame MENA historically and contemporarily. We contest the dominant narratives surrounding events, places, and phenomena in textbooks that often depict civilizations at odds with one another (see Huntington, 1993). We illuminate the ways in which peoples and societies not only interacted in collaborative and fluid ways at different political and historical junctures, but also were agents shaping their own trajectories in ways that are often obscured in textbooks and popular discourse.

This project constitutes a form of contrapuntal reading of dominant accounts of world history, or an analysis of not only what is included in the text, but also what is excluded (Said, 1997). A contrapuntal reading of textbooks accounts of the MENA is crucial to showing multiple possibilities and accounts of history (and thus a more complex whole), and to create space for perspectives commonly overlooked by textbooks. This critical analysis is particularly important in the current political milieu, when mainstream media (ordinarily, though not exclusively Western) often simplify the histories and identities of this region, exacerbating difference and otherness in ways that do not accurately reflect the Middle East in all its complexity (Jamal & Naber, 2008). We shed light on the often misguided and damaging ways this region and its people are framed, both in the media and in these analyzed textbooks.

Re-reading, Re-thinking, and Re-Imagining the Region: Process and Methods

Funded by a collaborative British Council and Social Science Research Council Grant, the research team, including scholars based at six US research universities, engaged in multidisciplinary scholarship on the Middle East and North Africa. The committee convened throughout 2012-2013 to: (1) review and analyze the most commonly used high school World History textbooks in the US; (2) share analyses with each other and other researchers and experts in the fields of MENA studies, history, and religion; (3) synthesize and discuss how to integrate innovative scholarship on the region into curricular guides and lesson plans for grades 9-12; and (4) generate robust curricula through a multi-model website for teachers (Hantzopoulos, et. al, 2014). Overall, this multi-faceted research and curricular project exemplifies the ways in which empirically grounded research can inform practice, not just for curricula on MENA, but on other topics as well.

Table 1

Timeline of “Re-thinking the Region” Project

<u>Phases</u>	<u>Methods and Activities</u>
<i>Phase I:</i> June 2012 –September 2012	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Literature Review 2. Project design
<i>Phase II:</i> September 2012 – January 2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Identification of four most commonly utilized World History textbooks in the US ● Pilot analysis to develop codes ● Generation of comprehensive codes for textbook analysis ● Coding of textbooks ● Cross-check of coding across textbooks by various members of

	research team
<i>Phase III:</i> December 2012– February 2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Summary of analysis into memos for history and area studies scholars in the US and the Middle East ● Meetings with scholars in Lebanon to discuss the teaching of the Middle East
<i>Phase IV:</i> January 2013 – December 2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Review of extensive memos and source material prepared by history and area studies scholars ● Identification of key thematic areas for curricular intervention ● Review of existing supplemental materials for the teaching of the Middle East and North Africa in the United States ● Development of a 350-page curriculum for high school teachers and students in the US
<i>Phase V:</i> January 2014 – ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Launch of website with resources, curriculum, additional materials ● Dissemination of research findings and curriculum at numerous conferences, workshops and seminars ● Outreach and dissemination of curriculum to teachers through professional societies, list-serves ● Professional development for educators

Re-reading the Region: Textbook Analysis

The textbook analysis, spanned four months and consisted of examining the ways in which the region is framed and described historically in the texts. Attention was paid to categories that describe events and patterns like the rise and spread of Islam, the Crusades, and the Ottoman Empire as points of departure. We chose the four most widely adopted World History textbooks in the US for high school (grades 9-12) world and global history classrooms based on criteria developed by the American Textbook Council (Sewall, 2003). Although some of the textbooks have outdated publication dates, they are still widely used in US classrooms. Since some textbooks organize the content chronologically, and others thematically, we took the various formats into consideration to broadly answer the following questions, some of which have been adapted from review guidelines of the American Textbook Council:

1. How historically accurate is the content?
2. What dominant narratives and themes emerge from the texts and what narratives are left out?
3. Are pictorial and sidebar materials relevant to the subject matter and do they add or detract nuance to the material presented?
4. How do these tools or resources in textbooks facilitate a deeper engagement with the content?
5. How do these texts convey social identities and cultural practices?

Using these questions as a guide and springboard, we met and collectively analyzed a section from one textbook together. We examined the text for: historical accuracy; dominant and subjugated narratives; tone and normative language; relevance and context of pictorial and sidebar materials; and omission of multiple perspectives.

Through our initial analysis, we created an interpretive rubric with the following categories from which to analyze the remaining chapters and textbooks: gender, sexuality, tradition versus modernity, faith, empire, political system, east/west, violence, rationality, identity, culture, and geography. Each

researcher analyzed a different textbook, while the principal investigator analyzed and reviewed all of them. When we regrouped to discuss our analyses, we also added the category False Agency, to describe the phenomenon in which textbook authors use a vague entity to describe an action, obfuscating the real agency of certain groups of peoples. In reference to imperialism, for example, one textbook stated, “While European industry and trade pressed ahead, the aging Ottoman Empire remained dependent on agriculture” (Beck, et. al, 2005, p. 274). Not only does this phrase intimate that ‘European industry and trade’ are agentive actors, it also suggests that the Ottomans are stagnant and passive. Further, the passage implies that Europeans were naturally superior technologically, masking how they garnered wealth. This phrase obscures the scientific debt owed to other non-European civilizations, whose previously developed knowledge and frameworks enabled such advancements. It presents Europe and the Ottomans as static, monolithic entities, missing an opportunity to discuss heterogeneity and the various forms of diversity, intellectual exchange during the Ottoman period (see Isom-Verhaaren, 2011; Khuri-Makdisi, 2010; Matar, 2008).

Re-Thinking the Region: Consolidating the Data & Sharing the Analysis

Upon completion of the analysis, the researcher team discussed and consolidated the findings. We previously had created detailed analysis grids that explain how the coding was conducted, and upon meeting, created a list outlining broad recurrent themes and issues that emerged from our individual analyses. Table 2 provides a generalized summary of findings from our analyses (see also Hantzopoulos, et. al, 2014).

Table 2

Summary of Findings Emerging from Textbook Analysis

<u>Finding</u>	<u>Brief Explanation</u>
Conflation of Islam with the Middle East	Texts discuss Islam and the Middle East as though they were interchangeable, whereby Islam and/or Muslims are viewed as particular to the region, and the region and its peoples are depicted as being Islamic or Muslim
Totalizing and over-simplistic representation of Islam	Islam is described in a totalizing and over-simplistic way, masking the region’s religious diversity and the diversity within Islam
Use of ahistorical and normative language	Texts employ ahistorical and normative language to describe the region’s histories
Eurocentric perspectives	Events are generally described from a European, and then eventually American, vantage point
History of states, not peoples	Events are presented as a history of states taking action or being acted upon, not peoples
Women depicted as oppressed	Women are commonly discussed in terms of being oppressed or being given freedom (by men or empires), but rarely as agents in history
Stereotypical visuals	Visual textboxes, particularly with respect to gender, are often stereotypical (e.g. an image of veiled women)
Monolithic construction of the region	A monolithic depiction of the region minimizes the linguistic, cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity of the region, or the presence of minorities (e.g. Arab Christians, Bah’ais, Arab Jews, Kurds, Druze, etc.)

European colonization and imperialism partially treated	European colonization and imperialism is not fully treated in texts, thus ignoring root causes of many contemporary conflicts
Texts do not adequately reflect contestation, struggle and (rational) debates of region's peoples throughout history	Texts ignore the agency of the region's peoples, such as people's movements in the creation of modern nation-states

After synthesizing the findings, we contacted MENA scholars specializing in various historical periods and MENA geographies. Some of these areas, for instance, included: Medieval Studies, Ottoman studies, gender and social movements, and Levantine politics, among others. We shared key research findings from the textbook analyses and asked the scholars to provide commentary, including primary source material that could serve as evidence or a starting point for developing curriculum. Each consultant examined one or more specific thematic areas. One historical consultant, for example, was asked to discuss the multiple forms of diversity that existed within the emergent Eastern Mediterranean nation states. We requested she also specifically provide resources to address the oft-framed false continuity from the Ancient to the Modern (e.g. Persia to Iran, Ancient Egypt to Modern Egypt, Hellas to Greece), which both masks the vibrant ethnic, political, religious diversity and realities and ignores large swaths of histories that truly informed these transitions. Our request also described our approach to the curriculum, which emphasized big ideas, large essential questions, and multiple perspectives on an issue or topic. We requested minimally 15 resources (both print and media) from the scholars for us to synthesize and integrate into curricula and web-based materials for Grades 9-12 teachers. These resources included poems, songs, texts, images, and a variety of sources we could use to aid in the development of curricular interventions. We requested brief explanations for each source to situate the example and to explain how it addresses the issues in our findings. Each consultant also provided five must-read monographs specifically dealing with historical topics relevant to the dilemmas and issues highlighted in the report. This information was added to an extensive annotated bibliography for high school teachers.

A similar process was simultaneously underway with MENA-based education scholars. In a meeting in Beirut, two members of the team met and discussed the study's findings with colleagues in Lebanon to brainstorm possible ways in which to generate the curriculum. These colleagues shared information about how their regional curricula treated the same issues. They also shared expertise and provided secondary source material to help us frame key issues arising from the study.

Re-Imagining The Region: Generating Curricula

After reviewing our findings, and considering the materials from the historical and educational scholars, the research team decided to create our curriculum around the following five themes: women and gender; plural identities; empire and nation; political and social movements; and arts and technology. We chose these themes because they were presented in reductive and incomplete ways in the textbooks we analyzed, so we wanted to generate lessons and curricula integrating a multiplicity and diversity of experiences and realities. We received rich sources from the historical and area studies scholars that complicated the narrow ways in which these themes are often framed, so, we had a plethora of material from which to draw.

We spent the spring and summer of 2013 creating cohesive curricula and lesson plans that

specifically responded to the results of the analysis and the related primary and secondary source material shared by the US and MENA-based scholars. Each member of the core team committed to developing three lesson plans related to one of the themes. Each also served as a primary reviewer for a second theme, thus creating a systemic process that allowed the crosschecking of one another's work before the curriculum was sent to the editors. In approaching our curricula, we wanted to give primacy to people's histories and movements (See Zinn, 1980), since they are often left out of the grand narratives in textbooks and popular media. After much discussion, we decided we would approach the lessons as non-linear stand-alone in-depth lessons, rather than sequential units, so teachers could choose if they wanted to pause from the pre-existing curriculum and focus on a theme. Understanding many educators are now bound by culminating high-stakes examinations (see Nichols & Berliner, 2008), we wanted to create a resource that would provide teachers flexibility in choosing what themes they felt needed more attention, and then create lessons that would supplement, enrich, and broaden the traditional curriculum.

Each member of the curriculum development team contextualized the unit around thematic introductions, framed each lesson around essential questions, and aligned them with the Common Core (2014) and New York State Standards (2014) since the curriculum is mostly, though not exclusively, being promoted in New York. After several rounds of exchange and revision among the team members, we submitted the whole curriculum to two sets of editors. We then worked with a web-designer to determine how to make the curriculum user-friendly on the Internet. Next, we found open-access images through publicly available archives and requested permissions for sources when we needed them. Finally, we also conducted test-runs with colleagues to check for accessibility and intuitive web design. The entire 350-page curriculum was launched in January 2014 through a series of press releases and presentations at numerous conferences.

Scholarly Significance of the Study and Implications of the Work

This project is an exemplar of how rigorous academic research can inform educational practice. Too often, research remains in the esoteric realm of academia. This project exemplifies how empirical study can generate practical interventions such as dynamic and responsive curricula. This project also reflects how scholars across different fields (education, history, area studies, international development) and across different regions (scholars in the US and in the Middle East) can collaborate to both understand phenomena more deeply and develop targeted interventions based on data and analyses. In this case, the research team worked collaboratively with other scholars across the globe to integrate new cutting edge resources and scholarship into the curriculum. It is this level of collaboration that yields rich data analyses and interpretation. This collaborative process also enables a vibrant and timely approach to curricular development that embodies creativity and cultural relevance.

We think our process is one from which other similar projects can draw; namely, as a way of engaging in praxis and collaboration across geographic location, theme, and professional sphere. There are several lessons that can be tailored for others seeking to elucidate and highlight contested realities and complex themes in world regions. The first implication for other educators and scholars is to fuse rich historical understanding (including debates, dis-junctures, and contested histories) with primary source materials that allow learners to develop their own critical thinking skills relative to multiple perspectives and histories. Fusion may include the use of popular sources, such as music, photography, graffiti, and oral histories that both reveal alternative narratives and invite students to reconsider how some textbook writers have traditionally relied upon official or elite sources to construct the past. In this way, educators and students together can fashion a contrapuntal reading of world history, and interrupt

the ways in which the MENA region and the Western world have been placed in recurring conflict with each other. By democratizing the analysis of historical events, rather than purely relying on an invisible textbook writer to frame and narrate diverse histories, students become agents of their own learning and critical thinkers.

Interdisciplinary, multi-sector (teachers, professors, historians, education scholars, etc.), and transnational partnerships offer rich resources for the curriculum development for the social studies classroom. While resources and opportunities may be limited, there are programs and opportunities (e.g. Fulbright-Hayes, the National Endowment for the Humanities), for teachers to engage first-hand with the realities in the textbooks they teach. In an age of increasingly top-down approaches to curriculum, instruction, assessment, the opportunities for collaborative knowledge production among teachers are essential, enabling teachers to be agents of genuine learning and transformation in their classrooms. Insights garnered from such engagement provide avenues for interrogating singular narrations of the peoples, cultures, and histories of a given region.

Research-into-practice initiatives (in this case, textbook analysis into curricular innovation) are central to educational research. While public schools, teacher education programs, and teachers themselves are under scrutiny and de-professionalized in the US, scholars of education need to reclaim their expertise and utilize their research for the betterment of educational practice. Finding ways to translate what they come to know through grounded and sound research in ways that are accessible and useful for teachers (particularly in an age of standardization), should be central to the work of educational researchers.

Given the current political context in which the MENA region and its peoples are demonized and misrepresented, this research and curriculum are both necessary and urgent. At present, there is a dearth of nuanced and complex curricula and guides for elementary and secondary teachers on MENA. While we have found a proliferation of resources on this region since September 11, 2001, we have also encountered the case that often one grand narrative is simply replaced by another one (see Lyotard, 1979). Since falsehoods and misrepresentations about the Middle East and North Africa abound in textbooks, in the media, and throughout popular culture in the USA, alternative perspectives and learning processes (particularly those anchored in rich primary sources) are powerful ways for curriculum planners and educators to encourage critical and independent thinking. In our curriculum, we have endeavored to avoid reductive approaches to the region and highlight multiplicity and plurality. There is no better way to understand complex issues than to offer multiple points of entree for the learner to make deep connections with the topic of study.

In sum, we think that our process is one from which other similar projects can draw; namely, as a way of engaging in praxis and collaboration across geographic location, theme, and professional sphere. The entire *Rethinking the Region* endeavor offers new ways, processes, and models for thinking about the creation of evidence-based curricular interventions in US social studies classrooms. The combination of historical understanding, engagement with primary sources, and a focus on multiplicity offers educators abundant resources for a contrapuntal pedagogy of the Middle East and North Africa. While dominant trends seek to simplify and reduce peoples, places, and events into sound bytes, social studies educators and educational researchers must resist these processes by expanding the frame and democratizing the learning processes in our classrooms. It is only then high school students can develop a critical and informed understanding of the social and political conditions that surround them.

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