

Trends in Pedagogy

Re-writing the Social Studies Curriculum in Texas: Religion, Politics, & Eurocentrism in the World History Standards

by Kaitlyn Waynen

According to Walter Russell Mead, professor of Foreign Affairs and Humanities at Bard College, “a working knowledge of world history is socially, politically, economically, and culturally indispensable for young Americans” in an increasingly interconnected and global world.¹ Mead asserts that “Nations that were little more than curiosities to most Americans have transformed themselves into places of vital interest and concern” in the past decade.² In 2006, Mead conducted a study for the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a non-profit organization that specializes in educational research; the study accessed the world history education standards and curricula in each state. Over half of these state standards received ratings below acceptable. The study uncovered an abundance of concerns across many states, including non-chronological curricula, an absence of coherent, detailed standards, the allowance of world history as an optional rather than mandatory course, and a notable over emphasis on western civilizations and European history.

Texas received scores from this study that put the state slightly above others earning inexcusable ratings. The criteria Mead used to gauge the academic validity of each state’s world history standards included appraisal of the standards’ content and instructional focus. Mead found there to be eleven core content areas central to study of world history and three key instructional focuses that standards must have to be considered acceptable. He then formed a scoring system that gave points to the

¹ Julio Noboa, “Missing Pages From the Human Story: World History According to Texas Standards,” *Journal of Latinos and Education* 11, no. 1 (2012): 48, accessed June 21, 2012, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2012.631441>.

² Walter R. Mead, “The State of State World History Standards,” (Washington, DC: Thomas B Fordham Institute, 2006) 8.

standards for adequately fulfilling parts of the criteria. He subsequently gave a letter grade to each state based on the number of points earned. State standards that scored a grade of A or B were considered above average while standards receiving grades of D or F were categorized as unacceptable.³ The standards in Texas, known as the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skill (TEKS), received the average score of C from the study. Though the standards in Texas were deemed acceptable, they did not achieve the high ratings of other states based on the standards created in 1998. Mead cited the lack of chronology and analysis of foreign cultures as the major shortcomings in these standards.⁴

In 2009 and 2010 the standards in Texas underwent revisions that drew national attention to the state's social studies curriculum. Because Texas is one of the largest consumers of textbooks, publishers of such materials often shape their products based on Texas curriculum standards, making changes to the TEKS a matter of national interest. The new world history standards show improvement in the areas Mead criticized in his 2006 study, but still have a number of problems and flaws, including a continued lack of content devoted to the study of societies outside of western civilizations, knowledge of which, critics agree, is needed in an increasingly global society.

It is first essential to define the term "world history" before further examination and analysis of the new world history standards in Texas. Defining the term is problematic because as prominent historian and now retired educator from Duke University, Arif Dirlik, suggests the concept of world history is based on "different understandings of the world and of history."⁵ Nevertheless, Dirlik finds that the study of world history "is inevitably about world-making," or explaining the present state of the world through examination of historical interactions that transcended national and societal boundaries.⁶ Another definition, offered by Jerry H. Bentley, history professor at the University of Hawaii, describes world history as historical scholarship that explicitly compares experiences across the boundary lines of societies.⁷ Bentley argues that "world history deals with historical processes that have not respected national, political, geographical, or cultural

³ Ibid, 9.

⁴ Ibid, 69.

⁵ Arif Dirlik, "Confounding Metaphors, Inventions of the World: What is World History For?," *The review of Education/Pedagogy/Cultural Studies* 22, no. 4 (2001): 323.

⁶ Ibid, 324.

⁷ Jerry H. Bentley, "The New World History." *A Companion to Western Historical Thought*. Kramer, Lloyd and Sarah Maza (eds). Blackwell Publishing, 2006. [Blackwell Reference Online](http://ezproxy.twu.edu:2386/subscriber/tocnode?id=g9781405149617_chunk_g978140514961723). 24 July 2012

boundary lines, but rather have influenced affairs on transregional, continental, hemispheric, and global scales.”⁸ Based on the definitions provided by these university professors, the study of world history encompasses many diverse interpretations of history from around the globe.

An understanding of the purpose and function of the TEKS is also needed before scrutinizing the newest version of the standards. The TEKS are essentially documents that tell educators working in the public education system in Texas what knowledge and skills students must develop in specific courses.⁹ The standards are divided by type of course; for example any course involving the study of geography, government or history is included in the social studies TEKS. The TEKS are then separated into these different sections—elementary, middle school, and high school—and are further subdivided by grade level and course. These standards are meant to guide teachers and ensure the intellectual development of students. However, the current TEKS, specifically the world history standards, often limit instructors and the growth of students.

Descriptions of the primary figures involved in the re-writing of the TEKS are essential to the continued discussion of the redraft process and the fallibility in the world history standards. Three key groups of people impacted the development of the new TEKS. The first group, the TEKS review committees, were comprised of highly experienced and recognized high school educators from around the state who reviewed and then re-wrote the standards. Committees were formed for each grade level and for each secondary social studies course.¹⁰ The second set of personalities involved in the process was the expert review panel, which consisted of three university professors from Texas, one professor from Virginia, Reverend Peter Marshall, and David Barton, president of Wallbuilders, a religious organization that promotes studying history through a religious lens. These six reviewers evaluated the 1998 standards, along with the first drafts created by the TEKS review committees, and made comments and suggestions for further improvement of the standards.¹¹ The final party involved in the revamping of the social studies curricula was the State Board of Education, also known as the SBOE. The fifteen members of the SBOE are elected to the board in partisan elections, and oversee the writing of the curricula standards for various subjects, a process that occurs every ten

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “Curriculum,” Texas Education Agency, Accessed: February 26, 2013, http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index.aspx?id=2147495412&menu_id=720&menu_id2=785&cid=2147483654.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

years. After the standards are re-written to coincide with current scholarship, the board votes on whether to enact them or not. The SBOE also has the power to delete and add material to the standards.¹² It is important to note that during the rewrite process of social studies standards in 2010, only six of these members possessed any noteworthy education experience and the majority of the board members had known conservative tendencies.

The revision of the social studies standards began in 2009 when the SBOE chose the members of the TEKS review committees. The Texas Council for the Social Studies, an organization that connects social studies educators from around the state to allow collaboration and professional development, formulated an outline for the review committees to follow during the initial redrafting process. However, Don McLeroy, a dentist serving on the SBOE at the time, but who has since lost his position on the board, branded the Texas CSS, “as a subversive organization trying to undermine the authority of the board.”¹³ Consequently, the SBOE turned down the initial draft. The review committees went back to the drawing board, and with help from the expert reviewers created new drafts of the social studies curriculum for each grade level and secondary course; they presented these versions to the board in the fall of 2009. Public hearings followed on March 10, 2010, and March 19, 2010, allowing the public to speak in support, in opposition, or simply make comments on the revisions. Finally, on May 21, 2010 the revised TEKS passed the scrutiny of the SBOE in a 9-5 vote. The new standards were implemented in the 2011 and 2012 academic school year in all social studies courses, including world history.¹⁴

According to David Fisher, a professor at the University of Texas in Brownsville, several of the modifications made to the world history TEKS during the revision process significantly improved the academic merit of the standards.¹⁵ One major change includes the adoption of a global periodization scheme. This course design, based on the College Board’s Advance Placement world history standards, allows educators to teach historical, global events in the rational, chronological order in which the events occurred rather than placing different historically significant episodes under often confusing and broad thematic categories.¹⁶ Walter Russell Mead, a humanities professor at Bard College, includes an example from the 1998

¹² Sue Blanchette, “Education or Indoctrination? The Development of Social Studies Standards in Texas,” *Social Education* 74, no. 4 (2010): 201, accessed June 21, 2012.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 200.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ David C. Fisher, “What’s Wrong (and Right) with World History in Texas” *World History Bulletin* 26, no. 2 (2010): 29.

¹⁶ Mead, “The State of State World History Standards,” 69.

version of the TEKS that illustrates this issue in his 2006 assessment of the world history curriculum standards in each state. He noticed that students were expected to “compare how governments function in selected world societies such as China, Germany, India and Russia.”¹⁷ However, there is no specific mention of a time period. Exploring the government formed by the German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck in the second half of the nineteenth century is very different from examining the Weimar Republic government in Germany after World War I. The governments of these countries changed during different periods of history, and without a time frame, teachers and students don’t know which governments were meant to be studied under this article. Through embracing a global periodization scheme, world history courses in Texas are now chronologically organized, reducing both teacher and student confusion.¹⁸

The educators charged with revising the 1998 version of the TEKS also took strides in widening the scope of world history from a course primarily focused on European history. For example, the former TEKS required students to specifically know dates significant in European history such as 1066, the year the Normans invaded England; 1492, the year Columbus discovered the new world; and 1939-1945, the years of World War II.¹⁹ The 2010 standards, rather, require students to recognize “turning points in world history,” that are not necessarily European. An example from the new standards that illustrates this improvement is article 13-F. This article calls upon educators to “explain how the Arab rejection of the State of Israel has led to ongoing conflict.”²⁰ When Israel was formed after World War II as an official homeland for the Jewish population, many of the Arab states surrounding the new territory banded together and attacked the new state. Contention between Israel and the surrounding Arab nations continues to affect the world today and stems from this important non-European turning point in history. Additions to the TEKS, such as article 13-F, bring the Texas world history standards closer to scholarly definitions of world history study.

Though the current TEKS are improved, they still have major flaws. One of these defects is an obvious religious bias, created by both the members of the expert review panel and the SBOE. The conservative SBOE appointed expert reviewers to assess both the old version of the TEKS and

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Fisher, “What’s Wrong (and Right) with World History in Texas,” 29.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Texas Administrative Code. Title 19, Part II Chapter 113. *Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Social Studies*. Subchapter C: High School, 113.42/World History Studies, <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index2.aspx?id=3643>.

the new draft. Two of these reviewers, Reverend Peter Marshall and David Barton, both of whom are religiously affiliated, added religious partiality to the revision process. Now deceased conservative, Presbyterian minister Marshall, a man who spent his life tracing “God’s hand in history,” dubbed the re-writing of the social studies TEKS as “an all-out moral and spiritual civil war for the soul of America.”²¹ In his introductory remarks of his review of the re-drafted TEKS he called for adding more religious content. He wrote that the re-drafted version of the TEKS made strong improvements in regards “to including the Bible and the Christian faith,” but he felt there were “still significant omissions which must be redressed.”²² In another comment the minister wrote that he wouldn’t mind if an article dedicated to the study of liberal organizations was included in the TEKS. He specifically mentioned Planned Parenthood as an example, but stipulated that discussion of such an organization would be acceptable “provided students are made aware of Planned Parenthood’s funding of abortion clinics.”²³ Abortion is a religiously charged topic and the addition of such a comment shows that his conservative, religious views impacted his review of the standards. Barton, the other reviewer with a religious predisposition like Marshall, promotes presenting history in a moral and religious context.²⁴ In his review, Barton stated all children must know that “unalienable rights are given by God.”²⁵ The problem with this declaration in a world history class is that, while the American Declaration of Independence and Constitution are influenced by Christian values, there are other democracies around the world that include unalienable rights in their constitutions who do not practice Christianity.

The 2010 version of the TEKS were also influenced by the religious bias of the SBOE members themselves. The standards still require the use of the Christian time signifiers BC and AD over the currently used BCE and CE. Eight members of the board voted to keep the older signifiers despite the majority of the expert review panel agreeing, “Adherence to modern discipline nomenclature needs to be in the Texas state standards.”²⁶ This

²¹ Fisher, “What’s Wrong (and Right) with World History in Texas,” 29.

²² Peter Marshall, “TEKS Review,” *Texas Education Agency*. September 10 2009, <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index2.aspx?id=6184>.

²³ *Ibid*.

²⁴ J. Kelton Williams, “God’s Country: Religion and the Evolution of the Social Studies Curriculum in Texas,” *American Educational History Journal* 37, no. 2 (2010): 439, accessed June 21, 2012.

²⁵ David Barton, “TEKS Review,” *Texas Education Agency*. September 10 2009, <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index2.aspx?id=6184>.

²⁶ Fisher, “What’s Wrong (and Right) with World History in Texas,” 437.

religious influence takes away from the overall academic nature of the TEKS and proper world history study.

Not only are the TEKS religiously influenced but the standards are also manipulated by politics. Don McLeroy, a conservative member on the board during the re-draft process, argued that the conservative influence on the standards was to add balance to information skewed by liberal bias.²⁷ However, other members, including Mary Helen Berlanga, who has served on the board since 1982, were perturbed by the conservative manipulation of the standards. She criticized the political influence of the board stating, "They are going overboard, they are not education experts. They are rewriting the history of Texas, the United States, and the world."²⁸ Education experts such as Texas A&M professor Dr. Don Bragaw, agree with Berlanga. In his article, "History and Politics: Reflections on the Texas Controversy," Bragaw articulates his concern over the political influence in the social studies TEKS, writing that the standards are dictated by a, "politically elected group who are not informed in the fields of social education," and rewrite the past to fit current political arguments.²⁹

Though much of the apparent conservative bias is found in the United States section of the TEKS, an extremely blatant example of a conservative partiality is seen in the world history standards. The board made the questionable decision to remove Thomas Jefferson from the list of important Enlightenment thinkers because his belief in the separation of church and state conflicted with the ideology of many of the board members. However, Jefferson's ideas irrefutably impacted the revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, events that are important in understanding the development of the modern world.³⁰ Sue Blanchette, president of the National Council on Social Studies, an organization that acts as a voice for social studies educators around the nation, states, "Providing students with a variety of viewpoints, teaching them how to identify the bias in those viewpoints, and encouraging them to come to independent conclusions based on the information learned is the role of the teacher in the classroom."³¹ The SBOE's embedment of conservative political ideology in the learning standards inhibits the development of this skill. Fischer

²⁷ Ibid, 29.

²⁸ Williams, "God's Country: Religion and the Evolution of the Social Studies Curriculum in Texas," 437.

²⁹ Don Bragaw, "History and Politics: Reflections on the Texas Controversy," *Social Education* 74, no. 3 (2010): 158, accessed June 21, 2012.

³⁰ Ibid, 159.

³¹ Blanchette, "Education or Indoctrination? The Development of Social Studies Standards in Texas," 201.

supports Blanchette's statement, writing in his assessment of the world history standards, "Ideological viewpoints describe the world as we would like it to be and when applied to history produce, tendentious, self-congratulatory attitudes that may make us feel good about ourselves, but do not explain the complex and complicated time in which we live."³²

A final concern with the world history curriculum standards in Texas is that, despite the effort to add more non-European history to the curriculum, the revised TEKS remain disproportionately Eurocentric. Though the development of the United States was largely influenced by Europe, further acknowledgement of other nations and cultures in the standards is needed to develop globally aware youth. According to Julio Noboa, an education professor at UT El Paso, Europe receives three times as much attention as any other area on the globe.³³ Many of the sections of the world history TEKS are dedicated to European topics and contain only subtopics that include histories of other areas. For example, section seven of the 10th grade world history standards encompasses the study of "the causes and impact of European Expansion from 1450 to 1750."³⁴ Within this section the examinations of China's impact on trade and the effect of the slave trade on West Africa are included, but only as supplementary topics to an overarching European subject. Other sections exclude the study of other regions of the globe altogether. Section eight of these same standards covers the global impact of the European Industrial Revolution and European Imperialism. Not one of the five included sub-topics mentions nations outside of Europe or examines how industrialization spread from Europe to other areas of the globe.³⁵

Furthermore, in a state with a high Hispanic enrollment rate, the world history standards in Texas fail to adequately address the history of Mexico. As of 2007, Hispanics made up 45.3% of the population in Texas public schools.³⁶ The examination of Hispanic culture and history is directly relevant to nearly half the student population in the Texas public education system. Noboa believes that an in-depth examination of Mexican culture would allow this significant block of students to "develop an appreciation

³² Fisher, "What's Wrong (and Right) with World History in Texas," 31.

³³ Noboa, "Missing Pages From the Human Story: World History According to Texas Standards," 53.

³⁴ Texas Administrative Code. Subchapter C: High School, 113.42/World History Studies.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Noboa, "Missing Pages from the Human Story: World History According to Texas Standards," 54.

for their own heritage,” while allowing non-Hispanic students to better understand the culture of their peers.³⁷

Robert E. Bain, a professor at the University of Michigan, categorizes this lack of focus on different cultures as the “Western Heritage Plus” model of world history education, adding facts and details about other cultures while focusing on the development of western civilization. History professor at Texas Woman’s University, Lybeth Hodges, served as an expert reviewer of the old and re-drafted versions of the social studies standards and stresses the importance of learning about other cultures and events that occurred outside of western civilization. She wrote in her review, “Today’s young people need to explore nations and cultures other than those with whom most of us identify...to understand the world in which they will live.”³⁸ Proper world history education must include the examination of many different perspectives and cultures from around the globe.

Overall, the 2010 world history Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills are much improved. Better periodization allows educators to teach historical material chronologically, reducing both teacher and student confusion once caused by over simplified themes. The new TEKS too include a broader spectrum of history from around the world. However, the world history standards still have problems that inhibit the thorough study of the global past and present. Religious bias from several of the expert reviewers affected the new standards during the re-write process, as did religious influence from members of the State Board of Education. An even more predominant political bias within the world history TEKS affects the academic validity of the standards. The conservative sway from the SBOE allowed for changes within particular areas of the world history standards the highly experienced TEKS review committee deemed acceptable. For example, the review committee chose to include the “contributions of Karl Marx,” in the standards.³⁹ However, conservative members of the SBOE found the use of the word “contributions” to describe the work written by the father of communism troubling, and instead changed the word to “influences”. Moreover, though the new standards include supplementary perspectives and history from non-European nations, the world history TEKS still largely focus on western civilizations. Both education and history experts agree that in an increasingly global society students need extensive familiarity with cultures other than their own. The world history standards

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Lybeth Hodges, “TEKS Review,” Texas Education Agency. September 10, 2009, <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index2.aspx?id=6184>.

³⁹ Texas Administrative Code. Subchapter C: High School, 113.42/World History Studies.

in Texas fall short in this imperative area. The combination of religious and political influences, along with the over emphasis on European history, in the Texas standards disallows a truly academic world history study and impedes the development of globally aware students.