

*School textbooks and teachers training
between past and present*

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The school textbook: a source and didactic tool

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ABSTRACT: The essay introduces the articles of the dossier *School textbooks and teachers training between past and present*. The dossier aims to contribute to the establishment in the field of textbook of that bond between research and training which for some time has been present for other historical sources. The focus is on the role of school textbooks not only as a source for researchers, but also as an instrument for the training of the new generations of teachers.

EET/TEE KEYWORDS: Textbook; Database; Teacher Education; Content of Education; Historical Research.

This dossier is the result of very real epistemological and methodological questions that we encounter every day as researchers and teachers. And neither is this a reason to consider them as themes of little substance or importance. If the job of the researcher is useful and enriching per se, today more than ever, with a crisis that is cultural more than it is economic and in a world of 'sad passions' or in which there is no faith in the future, research has to be an instrument for the direction of action. In the same way, it is necessary for research to fuel the desire to carry out research in the younger generations, whose job it will be to transmit knowledge.

The underlying ambition of the articles which follow is to contribute to the establishment in the field of textbook publication of that bond between research and training which for some time has been present for other historical

sources, such as literary works and iconography, just to name a couple. The use of historic school textbooks in the training field becomes even more useful, if not indispensable, considering that, perhaps even more than in the cases of the masterpieces of literature or of art, they were created for a purely pedagogical purpose. They originated as didactic instruments and, from a number of viewpoints, represent one of the most typical and refined products of modern mass education. It is, then, worth using them to create in students, and even more in teachers undergoing basic or on-going training, an awareness of the messages and functions of which textbooks and, more generally, the school system have been and still are the bearers.

Significantly, the first part of this dossier contains essays that may not seem very original in that they focus on textbook contents. In actual fact, they have the dual merit of illustrating aspects of the evolution of certain subjects and didactic practices as yet unexplored, and of highlighting the importance of concentrating on the contents, since textbooks are or have been the bearers of messages that are in many cases universal and culturally more profound than might commonly be believed. In fact, they say much not only of the type of mathematics taught in a given historical period, or of the image of the nation to be transmitted to pupils through history and geography, or again of how the civil and moral standards of a country have evolved. They remind us of who we are and where we come from, and what the pillars of our culture are, for better or for worse. Apart from the thoroughly researched reflections that Renaud d'Enfert makes on the teaching of mathematics in the middle school, the lucid considerations of Jacques Gleyse on moral education, of the strategies developed in Brazil to reduce illiteracy traced by Paulo Mello and of the role that the images analysed by Jean-Paul Artaud and François Loget have had in the teaching of science, the opening essays underline the value that a school textbook of the past has for the knowledge of the present. This is a first, fundamental reason for employing them in training today's students, even though they were written for pupils decades or even centuries ago.

Another choice that has inspired this dossier, and before the conference held at the University of Limoges in June 2013, is the use of the textbook as a means of debate among specialists of different subject areas. It is not easy to gather around one table historians and experts in didactics, and historians of textbook publication, of mathematics, literature, grammar, sport... Even so, the textbook by its very nature does lend itself to differing interpretations ranging from those linked to subject knowledge, to those of a more cultural and semiotic nature, from the historical to the methodological approach. Each can enlighten the other, and together they can help to render the complexity of the functions of textbooks and of the processes behind their conception, production, sale and use in the classroom and at home.

One objective that inspired the Limoges meeting first and then this collection of essays is the idea of the historical textbook not only as a source, but also as

didactic material. So, the main ambition of the Limoges meeting, which emerges in this dossier, was to compare different angles in order to respond to two needs. The first is to legitimise the databases, update them, and develop them scientifically and technologically. The second need consists of making teachers and teacher trainers aware of the existence and the wealth of the databases accessible by all. With the Limoges conference and this dossier, the databases can no longer be considered of interest to specialists alone, but also the domain of potential users that we have helped to identify. As for the first area, the study of textbooks has, in the space of thirty years, gradually become part of the documentary material used by historians to enquire into the history of education and didactics, as well as the history of publication and culture of the school. The aim, then, was certainly not that of exploring anything sensational, but of trying to define a limited aspect pertaining to the databases of textbooks. These also have quite a long history behind them and, internationally, a consolidated tradition of research. However, the constant updating of computer-based resources obliges historians to come to terms with technological and cultural changes imposed by the Web and by computer technology when orienting their choices.

The essays by Paolo Bianchini, Circe Bittencourt, Gabriela Ossenbach and Robert Strötgen aim to define the situation of textbook databases not so much from a historiographical point of view, but with an eye to the evaluation of what is really happening in terms of their evolution over the last few years, of the availability of online sources, and of their use for both heuristic purposes and in professional training. What emerges is that, on the one hand, the experience acquired in decades of work on schoolbooks has made historians and experts in didactics more careful in their assessments and in their critical use of textbooks while, on the other hand, the new era of globalisation opened by Internet imposes new and pressing challenges on researchers. The range of sources and studies has multiplied thanks to the Web and in order to find one's bearings it is necessary to have both some technical and, above all, some critical training when using digital resources. Then again, the essays highlight the connections that specialised databases have to face on the Web, in the first place, with digital libraries.

New working opportunities emerge, with original forms of contamination on the part of computer studies, and also thanks to the interest in new types of textbooks, like the ones published in Brazil for the indigenous populations and described in the article by Circe Bittencourt. The process that all the databases are more or less consciously undergoing is their transformation into real specialist portals, in which the catalogues of textbooks constitute only one of the usable resources, along with digital libraries and databases of laws, syllabuses and the iconography of the school in the past. This evolution is without a doubt proof of the willingness of historians concerned with textbook publication to keep up with the times and meet the challenge represented by Web 2.0. However,

it also exposes the flanks to new, inevitable problems. The first derives from the creation of computer technologies that are functional for online historical research, an operation which is anything but simple (and economical) in the presence of complex applications such as those for handling Opacs, relational databases, or that operate thanks to IT algorithms. Another problem is the relationship with the instruments commonly used by Internet users, such as web browsers, digital libraries and archives. The very user-friendliness of these instruments, making them accessible to the public at large, and the arrival on the historiographical scene (to be undoubtedly welcomed) of players such as Google, Yahoo and Microsoft, thanks to the digitalisation of books and sources, oblige historians to tackle with some urgency the problem of self-referentiality in how they carry out their research and what their fields of enquiry are.

To ignore that the databases created by and for historians are only a small part of what is present online means to refuse to use the enormous quantity of documents now available and to be condemned to voluntary marginalisation. For this reason, too, it is important for historiographical portals and the databases of school textbooks to be made known to scholars of other subject areas and to the non-specialist public, and to be used in the training of the new generations of teachers.

As regards the use of past textbooks as didactic tools for the present, we have chosen to focus our attention on the role that old school books may have in training future teachers as epistemological and didactic tools for the present. Created as the main didactic instrument in the modern school system, the textbook of the past cannot only be considered a document for use in analysing the era that produced it. It may be put back on the school desk as an instrument in training those whose task it will be to choose and use the textbooks of the future, that is trainee teachers.

It is a difficult challenge that several teacher-researchers from the IUFM¹ in France have chosen to accept. Indeed, many of these university facilities possess large collections in their libraries of several hundreds (even thousands in the most important libraries) of works linked to education (professional journals, official instructions, monographs and, of course, great numbers of school textbooks), mainly from the former Écoles Normales Primaires, the old teacher training institutes, as well as personal donations from former teachers and schools. Some of these collections, such as the CEDHRE in Montpellier, are largely open to researchers, students or teachers. For others, access is more limited and it is often necessary to demonstrate how important and how useful it is in the field of research into the teaching and/or training (initial or on-going) of schoolteachers. This is particularly the case in the ÉSPÉ of the Academies

¹ Since September 1st, 2013, the IUFM (Instituts Universitaires de Formation des Maîtres) have become ÉSPÉ (École Supérieure du Professorat et de l'Éducation). Following this introduction, we will mention the ÉSPÉ instead of the former IUFM.

of Limoges and of Poitiers to which many teacher-researchers have had the common wish to contribute within the bi-annual project *Étude d'ouvrages et d'objets pédagogiques anciens en lien avec l'enseignement* funded by the Pôle de Recherche et d'Enseignement Supérieur Limousin-Poitou Charentes. However, it is not a question of militancy or of the ideological acknowledgement of a certain heritage; it also corresponds to a real need in the field of teacher training. Effectively, the use of textbooks is still strongly recommended by institutions as it often represents a guide for teachers and a point of reference for pupils, but it is a reasoned use that must be put to the test by sharpening their critical eye². Inevitably, this is an issue for basic teacher training.

It is then in response to such necessities that Valérie Legros, Marc Moyon and Laetitia Perret share with us their modest multidisciplinary experience of the establishment, within the master's course in teaching, training and education instituted by their university, of an introduction to the research aimed at training reflexive practitioners starting from past school texts. This general article is fittingly completed by the highly disciplinary studies of Muriel Coret and Malika Kaheraoui into French grammar and its evolution in school texts (from 1845 to the present); of Hugues Marquis who attempts to outline the place of history books in teaching training; or the research of Maryvonne Priolet into the didactics of mathematics in which she questions the effectiveness of the use of textbooks by teachers in primary schools.

Alain Choppin, mentioned more than once in this dossier, is for us a natural forerunner for many of the themes dealt with. Not only did Choppin launch the use of databases of textbooks with the Emmanuelle project³, but he also used his competence in order to train teachers both in the former Institut National de Recherche Pédagogique (INRP) and as a member of the International Association for Research on Textbooks and Educational Media (IARTEM). It is a pleasure for us to dedicate our studies ideally to Alain Choppin, hoping to be able to discuss them with him at a distance and receive some advice and his certain and sincere encouragement.

Finally, we would particularly like to thank all the authors of this dossier as well as those who participated in the meeting *À livre ouvert. Manuels Scolaires*

² This 'critical eye' is explicitly mentioned, and more than once, in the recent report (no. 2013-066) of the Inspection Générale de l'Éducation Nationale française (June 2013) on the *Bilan de la mise en œuvre des programmes issus de la réforme de l'école primaire de 2008*, see <<http://www.education.gouv.fr/cid75316/bilan-de-la-mise-en-oeuvre-des-programmes-issus-de-la-reforme-de-l-ecole-primaire-de-2008.html>> (last access January 9th 2014).

³ In this dossier there are no articles dedicated to Emmanuelle and its history. It is, of course, well-known and was treated thoroughly in the Limoges conference by Clémence Cardon Quint, who study the scheme during her period at the Service d'Histoire de l'éducation, describing its evolution, and how it works in the essay entitled *La base Emmanuelle: histoire et perspectives*, in M. Berré, F. Brasseur, C. Gobeaux, R. Plisnier (edd.), *Les manuels scolaires dans l'histoire de l'éducation: un enjeu patrimonial et scientifique*, Mons, Centre international de phonétique appliquée, 2013, pp. 21-38.

et Formation des Maîtres entre passé et présent who contributed greatly to making the exchanges fruitful. We must also thank the universities and research centres of those who participated and without whom the meeting would not have been possible, and in particular the University of Limoges, the University of Turin, the PRES Limousin-Poitou Charentes and the Région Limousin.