

Final Report

Project Title and Co-PIs: *Toward a Global Perspective on World History at the High School Level*; Sam Wineburg, Brigid Barron (Stanford); Hans Albin Larsson (Sweden)
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Introduction

The teaching of history takes place in a national context that frames historical events and grinds the interpretive lenses used to study them. Topics taught in the World history curriculum – the “Scramble for Africa,” “The Industrial Revolution,” “World War II” – are, perforce, reflected through the prism of each nation’s unique history. The goal of our project was to enhance the teaching of history to students in Sweden and the United States using new means of collaboration afforded by ICTs. Our project sought to overcome the limitations of a single national lens in the teaching of World History. Our intent was to help high school students in two countries understand how the same event - World War II - can be viewed and understood from different vantage points. We hoped that students, by comparing what they learn to peers in another country, would develop greater historical understanding, a deeper sense of the perspectival nature of historical knowing, and a firmer commitment to global citizenship.

Participants

This study featured two history classrooms of secondary students, one from the United States, and the other from Sweden. The American classroom, located in a well-to-do suburb of the San Francisco Bay Area, consisted of 34 students enrolled in an Advanced Placement (AP) American history course. The Swedish classroom included 23 students and was located outside the town of Malmo in the south of Sweden. Two teachers participated in this study, one Swedish and one American. Both teachers were selected, in part, because of their experience and reputations as exemplary history instructors.

Design

This project was designed as an exploratory, intervention study. It included pre- and post surveys to gauge student attitudes and perceptions of history and history textbooks (these are described below and the instruments are provided in Appendix A & B) and an intervention consisting of 3 days of instruction (Appendix C).

Intervention

This study’s intervention featured three days of classroom lessons that helped students to analyze both Swedish and American textbook accounts of the Second World War and to

focus, in particular, on each textbook's treatment of the Finnish Winter War, the allied invasion of Normandy, and isolationism.

On Day 1, after completing the pre-survey, students made general comparisons between the American and Swedish textbook's chapters covering the Second World War. First, they examined the layout and organization of each text, taking note of images, captions, sidebars, and how each chapter began and ended. Students then compared which historical events were prominent in each text and speculated on what accounted for the differences they found. Finally, students generated questions about the United States' and Sweden's roles in the Second World War and described what they found most interesting or surprising about each textbook.

On Day 2 of the intervention, students compared and contrasted how each textbook covered the Finnish Winter War and the invasion of Normandy. Again, students considered what might account for the differing accounts of these events. In order to provide focus, we asked students to think about how national economic interests, geographic location, national security, and cultural heritage might influence each textbook account when formulating their responses.

The final day featured an "opening up the textbook" activity where students critically examined the American textbook's account of isolationism in the United States during the 1930s. Students listed what, according to the textbook, were the reasons for American isolationism and summarized the textbook's presentation of "isolationist" and "interventionist" positions on the war. We then presented students with two primary documents that contested and extended the textbook's description of American isolationism. Students read an excerpt from an article written by Charles Lindbergh in 1939 and a *New York Times* article about an anti-war rally in New York City. Both articles included references to pro-German, racist, and xenophobic motivations behind American isolationism that were not included in the textbook. We asked students why the textbook might choose not to include such descriptions of American isolationism. Finally, students focused on the Swedish textbook's account of public opinion regarding Nazi Germany. They summarized these opinions, formulated questions for the textbook that might complicate its depiction of Swedish perspectives of Nazi Germany, and then considered what historical sources could be used to answer these questions.

In addition, while working through these lessons, students in each class were presented with results from the pre-survey. The Swedish and American students then emailed each other questions regarding the survey results. Two groups of American students responded to the Swedish students' questions. In addition, a number of Swedish students sent "presentations" of themselves to the American classroom. These consisted primarily of brief descriptions of student backgrounds and interests.

Research Instruments

We were interested in learning whether this relatively brief cross-cultural textbook analysis activity would change students' attitudes and perspectives on how history is represented by each country's textbooks. In addition, we were interested in the similarities and differences between the Swedish and American students in their perception of their history classes and knowledge of international issues before any

exchange occurred. We used an on-line survey environment to collect the data. The pre-test survey included Likert-response items, checklists, rating scales, and open-ended items. The questions were designed to get information about eight main areas: (1) Interest in international issues and feelings of connection to people from other countries, 7 items; (2) Attitudes about the appropriateness of war, 6 items; (3) Knowledge of relative dates of historical events and geography, 22 items; (5) Learning resources they use to learn about other countries, 11 items; (6) Trust of sources that represent historical information, 10 items; (7) Perceived value and purpose of learning history, 7 items; (8) Perspectives on teaching of history and textbooks in the US and Sweden, 12 items; (9) Family demographic information, 2 items.

Some of these items were generated for this study. Others were modified by earlier surveys created by members of the research team or by earlier studies of international attitudes. The 10-page 77-item survey was administered on-line to all Swedish and American students prior to the intervention. The post-test survey included a subset of the items in the pre-test. In addition, we asked students to respond to several open-ended questions designed to solicit their reasoning about the different accounts of WWII in the two textbooks they studied. We also asked them to reflect on the questions that their peers from another country had asked them in the email exchange.

Data and Analysis

Twenty-three Swedish students and thirty-five Americans completed the pre-survey. Both classrooms worked through versions of the intervention's lessons and materials. 27 Americans completed worksheet 1; 29 completed worksheet 2; and, 21 completed worksheet 3. We were not able to collect student work from the Swedish classroom, however, the Swedish teacher wrote detailed descriptions of the intervention that included several examples of student responses. The Swedes presented the American students with 9 questions regarding the pre-survey results; the Americans presented 8 questions. 20 Swedish students and 28 Americans completed the post-survey. 6 Swedish students created profiles ("presentations") of themselves.

Due to the uneven collection of intervention materials, our analysis was aimed primarily at the pre- and post-survey data. We compared Swedish and American attitudes towards history classes and textbooks as measured by the pre-survey Likert-response items. Because of our interest in the changing perceptions of students, most of our analysis was focused on pre and post constructed responses. We were particularly interested in the pre and post questions that asked students about the strengths and weaknesses of their textbook and why textbooks from different countries might differ in their accounts of historical events. We also focused on responses to the pre-survey question asking students what they thought would be the similarities and differences in how American and Swedish textbooks treat the topic of WWII and the post-survey question about which textbook has the more accurate account of WWII. We took a grounded approach to this analysis and coded student responses line by line, developing a coding system based upon student perceptions and beliefs.

Results

A number of interesting themes and findings emerged from an analysis of these data:

Pre-Survey Likert-Responses:

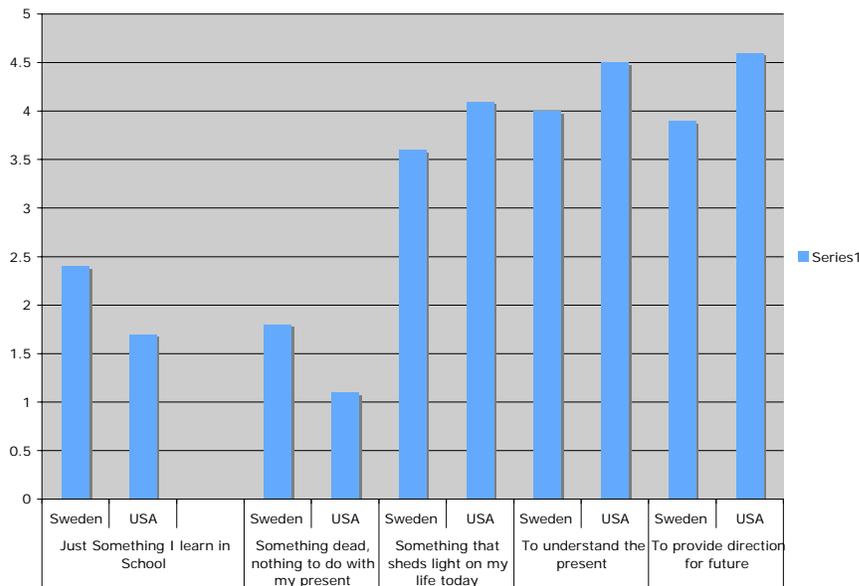
- American students appeared more trusting of history textbooks than Swedish students.

Table 1: Percentage of Students Reporting How Much They Trust Textbooks

	Very Much	Much	Some	Little
Americans	38	47	12	3
Swedes	0	52	48	0

- American students tended to have more dynamic and positive conceptions of history. On average, more Swedish students agreed with the statement that history is “just something I learn in school” and “something dead, nothing to do with my present.” American students reported slightly higher levels of agreement with the statements that history is “something that sheds light on my life today,” and that the purpose of history is to “understand the present,” and “provide direction for the future.

Figure 1: Swedish and American Responses to “What is History?”



- American and Swedish Students reported differences and similarities in how they perceive the teaching of history. Americans more frequently reported use of historical sources such as primary documents and maps, textbooks and worksheets, and the writing of argumentative essays, while Swedish students more often listened to teachers’ stories about the past than American students. Both classes reported similar amounts of watching historical films and documentaries, engaging in different activities such as “roles plays and local

projects,” “reinterpreting history” for themselves, and discussing different interpretations of the past.

Pre-Test Constructed Response

- Americans most frequently mentioned bias as a weakness of their textbooks, whereas none of the Swedes identified bias, or anything synonymous with biases, as a textbook weakness. This appears to be at odds with the pre-test survey of attitudes about the trustworthiness of texts, where more American students identified textbooks as trustworthy and Swedish students appeared more skeptical.
- Swedish students most often identified objectivity/neutrality as a strength of their textbook. Only one American student claimed, explicitly, that lack of bias was a strength of the American textbook.
- American students most frequently identified the level of detail and comprehensiveness as a strength of their textbook. These students also found fault with the density of the textbook, however, and the lack of multiple perspectives – which were, respectively, the second and third most commonly identified weakness. No Swedes mentioned such strengths, although they did identify the narrow focus of topics and lack of depth as a weakness of their textbook.
- By focusing on why textbooks from different countries might differ in their interpretations, Americans again identified bias most frequently, which the Swedes did not mention. Several students from both countries claimed that national/cultural perspectives influence textbooks and that texts focus on their respective country’s experiences. These were the top two reasons identified by the Swedes and the 2nd and 3rd most mentioned reasons of the Americans.

Post-Test Constructed Response

- Most students from both countries selected their own textbook as the more accurate account of WWII.

Table 2: Which Textbook has the most accurate account of WWII?

	American Students	Swedish Students
American Textbook	16 (70%)	3 (15%)
Swedish Textbook	1 (4%)	11 (55%)
Neither	6 (26%)	6 (30%)

- The most frequent comment by American students about the accuracy of textbooks was that the Swedish text leaves out important events and that the American text is more comprehensive and detailed. There was no single most frequent response by Swedish students, although 3 students identified the Swedish text as more neutral and less patriotic than the American textbook.

- Several students from both countries identified geography and location as one reason why textbooks differ. No students from either country identified geography or location in the pre-test. Geography was the most common Swedish response to identifying sources of difference, followed by politics, which was also not mentioned by anyone in the pre-test. Americans continued to mention bias, although not as frequently as in the pre-test, while both groups of students still identified cultural/national perspective as sources of difference.
- In regards to the biggest weakness of their textbook, the primary response of Americans was that their text overlooks events in other countries. This was not mentioned specifically by Americans in the pre-test. American students continued to identify the level of detail and “comprehensiveness of their textbook as its biggest strength though less frequently than they did in the pre-test.
- Fewer Swedish students identified the use of “multiple perspectives” as a strength of the textbook in the post-test. Swedish students continued to identify the lack of information and brevity of the text as central weaknesses and slightly more students claimed that their textbook was “missing key events.”

Conclusions

Despite the difficulties of coordination, the brevity of the intervention, and the lack of parallel implementation, this exploratory project was fruitful in a number of ways. First, both groups of students and teachers participated with a high degree of enthusiasm. Comments indicate that the participants clearly enjoyed collaborating, working with one another’s text, and considering each other’s historical perspectives. Such international collaboration has the potential to be highly engaging for high school students and teachers.

Furthermore, there is some evidence that even a short intervention focused on reading and considering different interpretations of historical events may lead students to adjust and develop their attitudes and perspectives on how and why history is represented by textbooks from different countries. This was most evident in some of the different pre- and post constructed responses -- where students, after participating in the intervention, began to consider the role of geography and politics in creating national, historical narratives, and to reconsider the strengths and weaknesses of their textbooks.

We believe that such findings, although exploratory, suggest that this type of study – if developed into a more involved collaboration, spanning a greater period of time and perhaps involving multiple countries – may be a promising approach to increasing the interest of secondary students in the study of history and developing historical thinking that prepare them for global citizenship.