TEXTBOOKS AND HISTORICAL AUTHENTICITY

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“Authenticity” is a term with many facets. It is a quality ascribed to people and to things. Something or someone described as being “authentic” is viewed as genuine, upright, true. Further connotations with “authenticity”, which add to this characteristic’s aura of authority, credibility and power to convince others, include adherence to the principle invoked by Shakespeare’s Polonius in his dictum “to thine own self be true” – the quality of a subject who fulfils his or her own potential for originality and in so doing leads a creative life, a life-to-the-full – and the property of an object whose identity as original and genuine has been confirmed and certified in some way. When we search for authenticity, then, we are looking at individuals and their relationship to society at large, but we are also directing our gaze within, into the emotional universe of individuals’ feelings, experiences and memories, and without, to the material world around us.

While the idea of “authenticity” has acquired particular interpretive authority from the second half of the twentieth century onward, it has been cited since ancient times. Jean-Jacques Rousseau popularised the notion that a person’s internal desires and external actions needed to be in accord with each other if that person was to achieve moral integrity and defend it in the face of the demands made upon them by the community at court, whose interactions were built upon expectations stemming from people’s roles and the ability to hide and alter one’s true self to suit the role. In other words, what we consider “authentic” is closely linked to modern ideas, arising from the Enlightenment era, of identity, self-determination and self-fulfilment and to the fear of “losing oneself”, becoming alienated from what and who one is.

Authenticity has become a central term in discourses around our present; its ubiquity both points to people’s experiences of alienation from their selves and communities and calls us to “become who we are”. It simultaneously expresses our longing for the attainment of individuality and an externally-driven compulsion to achieve this ideal, both of which we might read as responses to the challenges posed to us by the modern and post-modern age, reactions to experiences of a loss of uniqueness which come hand in hand with an imperative to be “as unique as possible”. This double-edged nature of authenticity, and its frequent citation in academic and popular discourses – it has even attained “street credibility” in youth culture – are two key factors pointing to the fact that it is part of the language of societal crisis.

But what does all this have to do with textbooks? We might respond to this legitimate question by considering whether textbooks are subject to the authenticity imperative. As media, textbooks speak with a voice to which authenticity is commonly ascribed; they communicate corpora of knowledge as being assured, authoritative, canonised and thus necessarily authentic; they predicate these acts of communication on the view, shared by the senders and receivers alike of the messages they carry, that the knowledge they transmit is authorised. We might in this light take
the view that they are always and already above any demand for authenticity. Yet textbooks are like other media in that they employ strategies of authentication whose aim is to present them as credible and appealing in their endeavour to communicate knowledge.

History textbooks in particular might perform their authenticity by means of forewords emphasising the authority of their authors and passages of text and turns of phrase which seek to underline that text’s reliability. Further strategies of this kind might include such elements as direct addresses to the reader, an authorial narrative which reduces historical contingency to the point of its elimination, the book’s cover design and format – down to the quality of the paper it is printed on – and the use of textual and visual sources. If we observe changes in the content and design of textbooks over time, we can perceive developments which point towards divergent ideas around authenticity and shifts in authentication practices. Textbooks may postulate possession of authentic, authoritative knowledge on a subject, or they may explicitly engage with the conditions in which this knowledge has arisen and is transmitted, referencing issues of how knowledge is or can be presented; an example might be a textbook’s communication to students of the nature of historical knowledge as a construct. Such issues approach authenticity less as a touchstone of crisis than as a relational term. They reference overarching questions relating to how people have engaged with the concept of the authentic in history and cast light on the processes and practices surrounding it.

The Georg Eckert Institute has joined with other member institutions of the Leibniz Association to study these matters in a research partnership on “Historical Authenticity”, which will focus on the impact of contemporary ideas of authenticity on our understanding of history, historical shifts in strategies intended to confer credibility, and conflicts around authenticity in the context of people’s interaction with their historical heritage.