



2013 HAWAII UNIVERSITY INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES
EDUCATION & TECHNOLOGY
MATH & ENGINEERING TECHNOLOGY
JUNE 10TH TO JUNE 12TH
ALA MOANA HOTEL, HONOLULU, HAWAII

INCOMPLETE EXPOSITION OR PROPAGANDA TOOLS? A LOOK AT SUNDAY SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS AS A CASE STUDY

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Abstract/ Proposal:

Incomplete Exposition or Propaganda Tools? A look at Sunday school textbooks as a case study

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Presented at the Hawaii University International Conferences June, 2013.

This paper argues that three stylistic flaws in writing- liberal generalizations, partial exposition of concepts and literary gloss- create problems in comprehension and accuracy for readers of religious textbooks.

Textbooks used in Islamic Sunday schools (Islamic schools that run briefly on Sundays) can be termed as indigenous literature because they combine historical texts, religious learning and cultural awareness within informal learning systems. Sunday schools tread a delicate path; they aim to imbue students with sense of communal identity yet, must also teach respect for pluralism. The audience in this case study is second-generation Pakistani-Americans children and teenagers who attend Islamic Sunday schools. The corpus for this paper uses excerpts from Islamic Studies Weekend Learning Series textbooks. These have been written by traditional community leaders with an ESL background. Because the textbooks are casually written, they are imbued with stylistic flaws which include liberal generalizations, partial exposition and literary gloss. Generalizations are broad sweeping statements that cover a multitude of topics. Generalization in writing creates rhetorical objects that transfer the main idea or skill to other purposes and genres. Generalized responses are likely to occur in settings that have similar features to instruction and so students are likely to transfer the generalized responses they see in the textbooks to real life examples. (Alber-Morgan, Hessler and Konrad)

Partial exposition is the inadequate explanation of terms or concepts that in turn create cognitive gaps in comprehension. This is manifested in form of weak paragraphs which lack topic sentences, supporting details and conclusions. Sentence level errors include use of double negatives, stylistic flaws and grammatical awkwardness. Literary gloss is reinterpretation or rewriting of historical facts to avoid blaming political or religious personalities/groups or whitewash partisan policies. Literary gloss is most prevalent within historical narratives and is used to avoiding blaming a contemporary, popular mindset. Literary gloss takes the form of factual errors, passive voice and misleading explanations.

Presently the textbooks afflicted by writing deficiencies can be used to radicalize students in the hands of a zealot teacher. Radicalization of American- born and raised Muslims particularly from Pakistan or converts is a minor yet significant trend. Salafi influence on textbooks and Islamic literature used in Sunday schools is subtle and tortuous. This influence may be wielded through organizations and individuals who have been indoctrinated in their home countries, and bring their Salafi worldview to the U.S. Salafi indoctrination is problematic as it turns adherents into intolerant though nonviolent individuals who divide the world in two groups; Salafi and non-Salafi (including moderate Sunnis, Shiites, Sufis, Jews and Christians). The intolerance creates "otherness" of individuals or groups who are seen as being beyond the realm of faith and salvation. Vigorous editing and rewriting of Sunday school textbooks will explain terms clearly and balance historical facts. This in turn will teach genuine tolerance and respect for non-Muslims and Muslim minorities.

Parental expectations drive Sunday School textbooks. Most parents are focused on content; they expect Islamic textbooks to be informative but not engaging. They do not expect a crisp, narrative style associated with creative nonfiction. Moreover their knowledge of Islamic history is deficient and they disregard literary gloss in text.

Key words: ESL, indigenous learning, writing style, stylistic flaws, literary gloss, partial exposition, Pakistani-Americans