



A Dream Comes True: An Autoethnographic Journey as an Author of Innovative Multimodal Indonesian History Textbooks for Kurikulum Merdeka

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Abstract. This paper explores the author's personal and professional journey in developing innovative multimodal history textbooks for the Indonesian Kurikulum Merdeka (the Curriculum of Freedom). Using an autoethnographic approach, I reflect on how I navigated challenges, negotiations, and successes throughout the process of writing and designing new Indonesian official history textbooks that not only align with the new curriculum, but also integrate various modes to engage students who live in a visual-dominated world. The autoethnography illuminates the often-unheard role of textbook author that in bridging historical content with innovative pedagogical strategies and design, particularly in the context of Indonesia's educational changes. This paper contributes to the ongoing discourse of multimodal learning and the significance of personalised narratives in educational reform.

Keywords: autoethnography, multimodality, innovative history textbook, Kurikulum Merdeka.

1 Introduction

Indonesia is in the middle of ongoing disruption of education initiated by Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Higher Education (hereafter referred as MoE) under the leadership of Nadiem Anwar Makarim (2019-2024). Makarim made numerous disruptive policies such as eliminating the National Examination in all educational levels and introducing a new curriculum called Kurikulum Merdeka (the Curriculum of Freedom). While the notion of freedom in the name of this curriculum is highly debatable in media (especially social media), this curriculum claims to offer more flexibility for schools and teachers in designing curriculum that suits with their own context. Additionally, this new curriculum also opens new possibilities in designing learning material, including textbooks.

Like in many countries, textbook in Indonesia remain an important feature in educational system and playing a central role in learning process. This is particularly true for history education, where textbooks are often regarded as authoritative source of knowledge. Previous studies shows that history learning in Indonesia is still heavily dominated the use of textbooks [1]–[3].

Most of history textbooks in Indonesia are multimodal, although they vary in their level of multimodality, ranging from very simple to more sophisticated design. Prior

to the 1990s, most textbooks are printed in black and white and incorporated only a small number of visuals. The advancement of printing technology, especially since the beginning of the 21st century, has allowed publishers to produce textbooks in colour, featuring more images and intricate design [4]. Starting from 2022, the government also produce audio textbooks, further contributing to multimodality.

As a researcher, I have been interested in studying history textbook in Indonesia, especially by employing critical discourse analysis [5]-[6]. However, only recently I turn into multimodal discourse analysis approach in studying textbooks as it offers more possibility in understanding discourses in history textbook, not only by taking a close analysis of images, but also visuals [4], [7]. The use of multimodality in my more recent research is highly influenced by my encounter with this approach during my PhD study at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore in 2019 – 2023. As many other scholars, I used ‘expert lenses’ in doing my research and often criticised authors of textbooks that I analysed. However, when I began working on textbook writing for the Kurikulum Merdeka in 2021, in the middle of my PhD journey, I realised that my researcher’s lenses – while important for critical analysis – often overlooked the authors’ point of views in their creative and intellectual processes in textbook writing. During my PhD research, I also realised the difficulty of understanding textbook authors’ perspectives to the lack available data or publication on these creative and intellectual processes.

These personal and professional experience and reflections as a researcher, and later a textbook author, have led me to realise the importance of writing documenting my experience in writing and designing innovative multimodal history textbooks in Indonesia by using autoethnography as a method of examining the textbook creation process. This has become even more significant given that the textbooks I wrote with my team are among those published by the MoE. Traditionally, this type of textbook is often categorised as official knowledge. Thus, in this paper, I would like to present personal narratives of writing these textbooks, particularly focussing of the challenges I faced and how I navigated them in producing innovative multimodal history textbooks.

2 Method

I deliberately opted to use autoethnography to detail my personal and professional experiences as a history textbook author for the MoE. Autoethnography is research approach that combines personal experience with cultural analysis to understand broader cultural contexts, challenging traditional research methods and emphasizing the political and socially-conscious nature of research [8]. This approach allows me as the author of the paper to become the subject of my own research which offers a unique and valuable dimension of research. Despite critiques of subjectivity of this approach, autoethnographic research offers rich, authentic, and nuance insights through unfiltered reflexivity, which can be lost in aggregate data analysis, making it a transformative method for understanding situated experiences [9].

Though I am also a textbook researcher, this paper primarily draws on my experiences as a textbook writer (2021 – 2022). However, I acknowledge that the knowledge I gained as a researcher has also influenced my decisions and actions as a

textbook author. Additionally, I recognise the limitations of my autoethnography, and thus, following Bartholomay & Otter [9], I suggest future research include more comprehensive interviews with other textbook authors to better understand their perspectives.

3 From a Researcher to a Textbook Author

As mentioned before, I have been studying and publishing articles on textbooks since 2012. In that position, I have been very critical to Indonesian history textbooks. At the same time, I also have my personal expectations or imaginations on how better history textbooks would look like. While it was always my dream to realise them, I never had a chance to realise them until 2021, when I was in the second year of PhD study.

It was a sunny day on October 2021 in Yogyakarta when I received phone calls – one from my friend, and the other one from a MoE staff – requesting me to take part in the writing of a new history textbook for Kurikulum Merdeka. I was in the middle of data collection for my PhD research back then. Those phone calls came unexpected to me as I often criticized history textbooks – especially the official ones – in my research. To my surprise, apparently my research is the reason why I was selected as a member of a team that will write the new history textbook.

Another surprise came when I was informed that the team will be given one month to write the initial draft of the textbook. Despite this shocking information, I accepted this almost impossible mission. As I recall, I accepted this task as I want to realise my dream to write better history textbook with more engaging design and multiperspective approach in history.

4 From a Researcher to a Textbook Author

As Writing history textbooks in Indonesia is challenging, especially when it comes to the official textbook. There are at least five challenges I encountered as an author of official history textbooks for the MoE. These challenges ranging from technical to pedagogical and ideological aspects surrounding the production of innovative history textbooks.

The first challenge relates to institutional and policies changes related to Kurikulum Merdeka. While the initial Learning Outcome (LO) of Kurikulum Merdeka was announced in 2021, it went through several revision process. These revisions occurred in conjunction with the textbook writing. While these revisions are necessary for the advancement of the curriculum, I found it quite stressful as on several occasions my team and I had prepared a draft and we had to revise it due to the sudden changes of LO in the middle of textbook production. I also got the impressions that there were institutional problems between the Center of Curriculum and the Center of Textbook, as the former often made sudden revisions which made the latter grapple in keeping up with those changes amidst the time constraints.

The second issue relates to the textbook content. My team and I had our own expectations of the textbooks' content. For example, we aimed to provide diverse

perspectives and move beyond traditional militaristic and political narratives. We sought to provide more nuanced narratives and incorporate new perspectives and contemporary findings in line with the spirit of Kurikulum Merdeka and the global movement in history education to move towards more disciplinary approach. However, achieving this goal proved challenging. Our reviewers – a historian and a history teacher – warned us against making radical changes, as they could cause disruptions, particularly among teachers who might not be ready for new approaches and interpretations. This concern is understandable, as teachers' reluctance to change is not unique to Indonesia. History teachers often tend to be conservative and resist changes in their teaching practices, including the content they deliver [10]. As I reported in my previous work [11], we have to do a “normative balancing between transferring values and discussing different perspectives” (p. 159). As advised by Anwas [12], history textbook authors must exercise caution in selecting topics, lexical choices, and presenting perspectives to prevent potential public controversies.

The third issue concerns with technical and pedagogical hurdles in designing innovative multimodal history textbooks. Multimodality in the history textbooks that I wrote with my team is not limited to the combination of text and visual, but also in providing QR code that will bring the reader to websites and YouTube channels. Finding the right modes (images, websites, and videos) are proved to be challenging as well as we need to take into considerations of the aesthetics, contents, meanings, and copyright of those materials. Additionally, those multimodal materials must be carefully curated to ensure they are not merely ornamental but must be instrumental in assisting students in learning. I was lucky to have a wonderful textbook illustrator and editor that helped me materialised my vision of an innovative multimodal textbooks.

The fourth challenge relates to the problem of navigating feedback from educators and stakeholders. As part of textbook production, the dummy of the new textbooks were sent for teacher review. While this is certainly a significant milestone, problems often occurred at this stage. As indicated earlier, some teachers involved in this process resisted some changes proposed by my team, while some others provided constructive feedbacks. In some cases, the problems were brought to the ‘higher ups’ in the Center of Textbook for moderating process before final judgements or decisions were made to address teachers' concerns.

The last challenges is time constraint, which exacerbates previous challenges. The lack of time provided by the Center of Textbook, especially in 2021, when I wrote history textbook for the 11th grade, made it really hard to write the textbook. I had to set aside my PhD research project for a whole month to meet the unrealistic deadline. While the Center of Textbook provide more time in the project of writing history textbook for 12th grade, it coincided with the beginning of my 4th year PhD and I must finish my thesis draft. Thus, I cannot do what I did in 2021. I had to be very careful in managing my time and juggling between writing the textbook and my own thesis.

Despite challenges I detailed in previous section, I found my journey in writing new history textbooks to be rewarding. The process of developing these new innovative multimodal history textbooks, though difficult, has allowed me to make a significant strides compared to previous history textbooks. The need for ‘normative balancing’ – reconciling innovative approaches with traditional expectations – was a recurring theme, but it eventually facilitated progress and improvements in the textbook content and design.

One of the most rewarding aspects of this experience was the opportunity to realise several of my visions for history textbooks. I always want to write history textbooks that are not only innovative and multimodal but also advocate multiperspectivity and historical inquiry. These elements are important for encouraging a more engaging and comprehensive learning experience for students.

Writing this autoethnography has provided me with an opportunity for personal and professional reflection. It has deepened my understanding of the complex interplay between my roles as a researcher and a textbook author. The process has been a humbling experience, reminding me of the inherent challenges and the meticulous work that goes into textbook writing. It has also granted an insider's perspective on the behind-the-screen aspects of textbook production – insights that are often unheard of. This perspective has not only enriched my appreciation for the intricacies of textbook writing, but also has reinforced the importance of humility and perseverance in facing complex challenges.

5 Conclusion

This paper has detailed my transformative journey from being a critical researcher to becoming a textbook author, highlighting both the aspirations and challenges encountered along the way. My initial critical stances on Indonesian history textbooks evolved into an opportunity to contribute through the field of history textbook writing for Kurikulum Merdeka project, which I undertook in the middle of my PhD study. In the process, I encountered numerous challenges, including curriculum shifts, normative balancing, technical problems, unexpected feedback, and time constraints.

Despite these challenges, these experiences are rewarding. It allowed me to materialised some of my dreams and visions of innovative and multimodal history textbooks. This journey enabled me to grasp a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in textbook production. The insights gained from this process will contribute to ongoing discussions about history textbooks' experiences that often overlooked.

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