

*A basic reconceptualization of
world affairs education is needed . . .*

THE thrust of world affairs into American life is one of the most observable and important developments in this country's recent history. The international scene is more visible today than ever before. There is a startling amount of information everywhere available about the history, religion, art, scenery, politics, and economic development of almost all areas of the world.

Today's Americans are constantly bombarded with information about the world through films, radio, television, newspapers, plays, and magazines. In fact, telstar can bring events and peoples in other areas of the world as near as one's television set. People are also traveling abroad in greater numbers. This is the first age in which men everywhere can see and hear one another.

This is also the first age in which man is capable of destroying his own species. The overriding question is whether man has the capacity to eliminate or drastically reduce the danger of nuclear war. At the same time he must feed an overcrowded world and seek to elevate millions of human beings from the degradation of poverty. These developments may also pose grave dangers to man's hopes for survival and for an improved world.

New Opportunities

The response of American society, including its education system, to this radically new situation has been un-

World Affairs A New

even. The passage of the International Education Act of 1966 represents a remarkable step by the Executive Branch and the Congress toward creating a new concept of American education.

For the first time in our history the educational system is being viewed as part of the world system, with the potential for cooperation with "all nations, friend and foe alike." Whether the stance of the government will result in new and better programs in world affairs education depends largely on the initiative and imagination of educators in our schools, colleges, and universities.

This article suggests some steps which might enable world affairs educators to make a greater contribution to the task of improving man's capacity to grapple with such crucial problems as hunger, disease, pollution, and unrestrained

Education: Role

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competition among nations. The author believes that the present situation requires not merely an improvement in our traditional way of doing things, but the development of new techniques and new attitudes which hopefully will enable us to meet the challenges humanity faces.

Clarity of Purpose Needed

In our schools, progress seems to be hampered by a considerable confusion and lack of direction stemming from a failure to clarify goals and objectives. The task of clarification and redefinition must begin. Obviously, no single conception of world affairs can or should be universally accepted. Changes in images, situations, and the state of knowledge require that the task be worked at continuously.

The International Education Act has

introduced a new clarity of purpose in this field. It proposes that the American student must learn to adapt himself to a world order in which his own culture is one among many cultures, each of which has its own validity and virtue. If we accept this educational principle, then to be educated in America is necessarily to be educated as a citizen of the international community.

Furthermore, educational reform is essential in order that educators may develop an understanding of the implications of this principle. The significance of this change in concept is best illustrated by contrasting the traditional bilateral or exchange-between-cultures approach with the study of the world as a social system in which each society or culture plays a part. This latter view is based on and affirms the principle of studying the world as a society because it is slowly becoming more *like* a society: interdependence among nations and peoples is growing, problems are increasingly common problems, and values are beginning to be shared values.

Awareness of Cultural Codes

A major purpose in learning about the world system is to identify and clarify humanity's common heritage and to explore ways of useful cooperation for common goals. Such a purpose will not necessarily result in a sympathy for a global view or a tolerance of cultural differences.

It is not certain to produce affection between peoples, nor need it do so. It is likely to provide some degree of perception and perspective about the varieties of preferences and aspirations in different societies, and about the common hu-

manity which unites us all. Furthermore, it should help us develop that rare and wonderful capacity to see the world as others see it: empathy. As Charles Frankel states:

A primary purpose of education and cultural exchange is to become aware of others' cultural codes and of our own—to bring to the surface the context of unspoken facts and assumptions within which their words and actions, and ours, can be correctly interpreted.¹

A major concern of world affairs education should therefore be making visible other cultural contexts. This should help students view the other fellow through his own framework, not through theirs—which may be largely irrelevant. To succeed in such a purpose, it is necessary to cultivate a greater degree of objectivity about the behavior and intentions of ourselves and others. An effort needs to be made to decontaminate the language used in discussing ourselves, other nations and peoples.

The most direct way of achieving an understanding of world affairs and of world cultures by American students is by giving them experience in cultures other than their own. This makes more obvious the natural ethnocentrism of all peoples and creates opportunities for insight into the common and unique features of the cultures involved. Since placing large numbers of students in foreign countries seems impractical at this time, increased effort should be made to provide white students with opportunities to work more closely with Negro, Spanish, Puerto Rican, Indian, or other minority groups in the

¹ Charles Frankel. *The Neglected Aspect of Foreign Affairs*. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1966. p. 70.

United States. Developing student awareness of cultural and social differences at home would, if properly handled, probably enable the student to respond more effectively to such differences on a world scale.

Again, exchange might not produce affection between peoples, but it might contribute significantly to the understanding of equivalent feelings and values: that is, an emotional awareness that other nations are populated not by ideologies which we fear, but by individuals with the same capacity for pleasure and pain, for cruelty and kindness, as the people in our own country. Learning such a lesson should enable the student to see more clearly the desirability or necessity of allowing each society to develop its own standards of public decency and self-fulfillment.

What is proposed here is that it is useful to deal with perception, perspective, empathy, and objectivity—key elements in devising approaches to world affairs education appropriate for our nuclear age—through increased contact with and participation in other cultures, either directly or vicariously.

Role of Information

Another question, however, looms large on the horizons of world affairs education, namely, how to deal with the increasing amount of available data about the peoples, places, and events on this planet. How, in other words, can we capitalize on the increased visibility of the world outside our own country? For the foreseeable future, at least, most of the individual's experience with the international, social, political, and economic world will be indirect.

This suggests that the task of educa-

tion in expanding, sharpening, and structuring the student's "picture" of the world is largely that of identifying, clarifying, and improving skills and insights needed to select and process information intelligently. Increasingly, man must learn to discriminate among a wide variety of messages from far off sources and improve his capacity to make choices about how and when to respond to incoming data.

World affairs education must help students develop criteria for discriminating, selecting, evaluating, and responding to useful and relevant data about events, trends, and developments on the international scene. The student needs a realistic pattern or framework for sifting and sorting, categorizing and classifying, evaluating and choosing among messages received from the international environment.

If teaching students to use a selection process is a major goal of education, a curriculum consisting of specified subject matter at each grade level is of little use. Students cannot learn to choose relevant information in a "content specific" setting. In a rapidly changing world where knowledge doubles each decade, cramming students full of descriptive details, definitions, and generalizations is not likely to be productive. What is needed is some way of helping the student develop his ability to pick and choose important and relevant materials from the ever-changing stream of information from the global scene. Content, then, becomes a means of reaching a more basic objective.

Students need to be helped to develop a conceptual scheme broad enough to be likely to yield insights and hypotheses

which can help them understand and participate intelligently in man's effort to deal with crucial social problems.

New Approaches

Several of the many innovations which are currently bursting on the educational scene are relevant to this problem. Among them are the following:

1. Universal concepts such as culture, civilization, and society are being identified and refined, and experience in helping students develop these concepts is being accumulated. These concepts are also being used more frequently to organize materials and instructions.

2. The search for data is more frequently being guided by use of concepts or ideas such as authoritarian, totalitarian, development, modernization, or conflict.

3. Using challenging, analytical questions or helping students learn to ask the "right questions" is more widely recognized as an important educational technique.

4. Experimentation with new methods of presenting materials appropriate to the substantive content has become a widespread practice. The methodology as well as the facts of the discipline is emphasized by many curriculum developers.

5. The use of comparative approaches, involving exercise in judging what is important enough to be compared and clarifying likenesses and differences in the ways social processes are used, also supports this purpose. Clearly, social processes and relationships rather than unrelated facts and descriptions should

be the focus of a curriculum geared to improving the student's ability to use a selection process.

Basic to this purpose is an effort which undergirds many of the activities and programs: the attempt to convert the classroom into a meeting of active participants in the educational process. It is well-known that students learn more readily when they are curious about a topic and interested in exploring it. Teachers are seeking new ways to stimulate students' interest as they plunge into a new area or topic.

Among the many devices being used in this regard, simulations and games are the most widely discussed. They are generally recognized for their motivational value. In addition, they serve to integrate numerous variables which operate simultaneously in complex processes. When such variables are described in textbook fashion they often lose their meaning. In order to play the game, students must utilize the information provided.

By requiring the student to digest and synthesize information and to develop strategies for achieving stated objectives, opportunities to develop decision-making skills are provided. The students' interest is further enhanced by the fact that their strategies are tested immediately and that quick feedback results.

In summary, the vast array of research and experimental efforts and an increasing amount of information about peoples everywhere are a cause for hope. The task is to fashion from these developments a curriculum more consonant with the demands of world affairs in the nuclear age.

Viewing the world as a social system and, as is the intent of several of the new projects, helping students develop the capacities to observe, analyze, evaluate, and participate in this global pattern could be an important step in redefining the schools' role in world affairs education. ❁

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