



MACOS: Social Studies in Crisis

Controversy over Man: A Course of Study has opened a debate that is more than surface deep. We have found that moral growth depends upon faith—but it is also built “on doubt, on questioning, and on the continued search for new ways to explain the unfathomable mystery of human existence.”*

On Friday, June 18, 1976, the Atlanta *Journal* carried a front page photograph of a minister being wrestled to the ground by police and FBI agents outside the Internal Revenue Service Tax Information Center in downtown Atlanta. The minister claimed to have a bomb in his attaché case, but when he was led away by the authorities, he said he did not have “a literal bomb but a literary bomb.”

Later, when the police opened the case, they found only papers. The minister, it turned out, was returning from a Southern Baptist convention in Norfolk, Virginia, where he had failed to persuade the gathering to condemn what he called the “Luciferian, Satanic, and Devil-filled” series of textbooks entitled *Man: A Course of Study*.¹

How curious that a course hailed in 1969 by the American Educational Publishers Institute and the American Educational Research Association as “one of the most important efforts of our time to relate research findings and theory in educational psychology to the development of new and better instructional materials” and as “enormously suggestive of what we could and should be doing to equip the instructional process adequately” should now be condemned by some

concerned citizens and even some members of Congress as a dangerous intrusion on the consciousness of the young.²

What was once regarded as an important breakthrough in helping children understand what makes human beings human is now attacked by Arizona Congressman John B. Conlan as a dangerous intrusion on children’s values that threatens to “mold children’s social attitudes and beliefs along lines that set them apart and alienate them from the beliefs and moral values of their parents and local communities.”³

But if the minister and the Congressman have found the anti-Christ in *Man: A Course of Study*, what then is the vision of man and society that we should be teaching our children in the schools?

* *Man: A Course of Study* is distributed by Curriculum Development Associates, Inc., 1211 Connecticut Avenue, Washington, D.C.

¹ After examining MACOS, the Southern Baptist Convention adopted a report stating that the curriculum materials need “neither be condemned nor endorsed by the SBC.” See: *The Washington Star*, June 18, 1976.

² Quotations taken from citation given to Jerome Bruner at annual meeting of AERA in February, 1969.

³ Congressional Record, April 9, 1975 (H2585).



Man: A Course of Study is a multimedia curriculum for teaching social science to students aged 10 through 13.



Defining Purposes of Social Education

Social studies teaching today suffers from a crisis of purpose. Not since 1917, when the National Education Association's Commission on the Reorganization of the Schools set down guidelines for social studies, has there been a serious national

education was under way. Many of the nation's most distinguished social scientists and historians were teaming up with some of our most gifted teachers in an effort to bring new intellectual vitality and purposefulness to social studies classes. Their efforts, moreover, were being financed by a federal government that was deeply committed to educational reform.

There was a strong belief among the scholars and teachers who participated in this work that the social sciences could bring a new level of conceptual analysis and social awareness to social studies teaching. The older, ethnocentric form of social education, which bordered on political indoctrination, was to be replaced by a broader view of human nature that placed our own history and culture in the framework of a cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural analysis based on insights drawn from social geography, psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics, political science, and even evolutionary biology.

Man: A Course of Study, which stressed a cross-cultural view of human behavior (What makes human beings human? How did they get that way? How can they become more so?), was one of dozens of federally funded projects that sought to introduce fresh perspectives from the social science disciplines—together with the methodology of social science—to the teaching of social studies.

Some reformers even abandoned the term "social studies" altogether, preferring the more academic label "social science." They argued that the study of human behavior could be treated with the same objectivity and intellectual discipline as the natural sciences. "Inquiry," not "indoctrination," was the new watchword.



One filmstrip from *Man: A Course of Study* lets students contrast the present lifestyle of the Netsilik Eskimos with former practices. Courtesy of Curriculum Development Associates, Washington, D. C.

effort to redefine the purposes of social education.

Despite two world wars, the Civil Rights Movement, the birth of the United Nations, the African Independence movement, the Russian and Chinese Revolutions, the Nazi holocaust, the Cold War, the Space Race, Vietnam, Women's Liberation, and our recent growth in environmental and energy awareness, we still teach social studies as if the only important history to know is our own and the only social problems in the world are "problems of democracy."

Ideals of the Sixties

A decade ago, when *Man: A Course of Study* and a host of other federally funded curriculum reform projects were still in the formative stages, there was hope that a revolution in thinking about social

Reform Movement Suffers

Unhappily, reformers never quite achieved the promise of their aspirations. They created many productive examples of new curricula⁴ that demonstrated the power of social science thinking and that offered many fresh approaches to the study and interpretation of human behavior. However, they never fully articulated their vision of the kind of society that could emerge from this more sophisticated way of viewing the human condition. Hence, they proved easy victims for the demagogues who now cry out that more attention be given to the moral education of the young.

Unfortunately, we social science educators had forgotten what John Dewey taught us over half a century ago, namely, that we cannot separate our conceptions of social education from our image of society—the kind of society we wish our children to inhabit. One searches in vain among the writings of the curriculum reformers of the 1960's for reference to this crucial dimension of educational reform. Its lack is the tragic flaw in those dedicated efforts, a flaw that helps to explain the curriculum crisis we face today.

Learning from Failure

"Hindsight is always 20-20," we are told, so it is probably simplistic to suggest how our past mistakes might direct us toward a more successful social studies curriculum in the future. Yet, I would betray my incurable optimism if I did not try.

Through our failures, as well as our triumphs, we have learned some important lessons from the recent social studies curriculum reform effort. These lessons merit the serious consideration of those

who will take up the torch for more effective social education in the future.

Children Are Curious and Perceptive: We have learned that small children are enormously curious about how the social world works. They want basic facts about how people and animals function—how they are born, reproduce, and die; how they care for and protect each other; what produces conflict between them; and what behaviors ensure survival from one generation to the next.

While we certainly cannot teach, as Jerome Bruner once thought, "any subject . . . to any child at any stage of development,"⁵



we have learned to push back the boundaries we have imposed on the capacity of the young to perceive meaning in the study of cultures and species remote from their direct experiences. When provided with good materials appropriate to their age, even very young children reveal a surprising ability to understand human behavior across a broad

A Netsilik woman prepares dinner for her family. From *Man: A Course of Study*. Courtesy of Curriculum Development Associates, Washington, D. C.

⁴ High School Geography Project (HSGP), Sociological Resources for Secondary Schools (SRSS), Anthropology Curriculum Study Project (ACSP), and others.

⁵ Jerome S. Bruner. *The Process of Education*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1960. p. 33.



Balloons are one form of modern recreation that today's Netsilik children thoroughly enjoy. From Man: A Course of Study. Courtesy of Curriculum Development Associates, Washington, D. C.

spectrum of cultural differences.

Social studies teachers would do well to abandon the myth that young children can understand only behaviors and environments they have directly experienced. Their most intense curiosity is stimulated by our closest primate relatives, chimpanzees and baboons, by the examination of cultures that offer provocative contrasts to our own.

Children Transform

Information: We have also found that children often learn best when they have a chance to play with new information in many different forms, including direct observation and data gathering, reading, drawing, role playing, joining in games, watching films, and constructing projects. One might say that the more forms that a new fact, idea, or experience can take on, the more likely it is to be assimilated and understood.

It is the manipulation of information that makes it accessible, since different children assimilate information in different ways. Therefore, social studies classrooms should be very rich in opportunities to transform information: stories

into plays, books into pictures, pictures into games, drawings into objects, experience into ideas. Continuous exchanges of information and concepts between mediums is a very powerful way to invest with meaning something as complex and elusive as the study of human behavior.

Children Accept Diversity:

We have learned, too, that young children have a tolerance for diversity that is seldom matched by more culture-bound adults. When encouraged to do so, children approach the study of behavior with an openness that offers the potential for deeper levels of human understanding than are usually permitted by our typically moralistic approaches to social education.

One of the worst mistakes of social studies teachers and curriculum planners is our passion for "getting a message across." We too easily succumb to the temptation to use our teaching to transmit values or to influence behavior, and in so doing, we weaken the credibility of our investigation.

One refreshing discovery of the curriculum reform movement is that,

when taught "honest social studies," children derive many of the same insights about behavior that adults do, and they are troubled by the same dilemmas, the same struggles between good and evil that have dominated our search for meaning throughout our history as a species. The complexity and variety of human behavior in all its manifestations are far more instructive and revealing—and more morally powerful—than pious sermonizing.

In Clyde Kluckhohn's provocative image, let our social studies teaching hold up a "*Mirror for Man*" before which the student can judge and shape his or her own behavior.⁶

Objective truth is the ultimate liberation in our study of man, but it is devilishly difficult to uncover because our tools are still so poor, and those who would choose to keep truth from us so strong.

Searching for Self-Understanding

All of which brings us back to the minister previously mentioned. What is the ultimate moral purpose of social studies teaching? Unless we can articulate that, perhaps the good pastor was right in saying that his briefcase contained concealed explosives. Why do we want the young to be exposed to the frontiers of social science—the latest ways of thinking about human nature?

Some years ago in Phoenix, Arizona, I was closely questioned about the educational philosophy underlying *Man: A Course of Study* by an angry newscaster. This person appeared to believe that the Holy Bible contained the last word on the nature of man.

"What I am trying to extract from you," he said, "is the admission that the most important thing to teach a child is faith."

"In Sunday school, yes," I agreed.

But moral growth, I pointed out, is built too on doubt, on questioning, and on the continued search for new ways to explain the unfathomable mystery of human existence. The conviction that we don't know what makes us what we are and that we need more powerful tools and ways of thinking to deepen our understanding of the human plight, is the intellectual and spiritual cornerstone upon which *Man: A Course of Study* rests. Unfortunately, the power of the course was just beginning to be felt when it was attacked by demagogues, who would prefer that children be kept in ignorance rather than be exposed to new ways of thinking about human nature.

Scenic grandeur is but one facet of Eskimo life. As children learn from *Man: A Course of Study*, the Netsilik Eskimos must also deal with isolation and problems of daily survival. From *Man: A Course of Study*. Courtesy of Curriculum Development Associates, Washington, D. C.



But, I seriously doubt that the search for a better understanding of ourselves can be stopped for long. Our survival on a shrinking planet may depend on it.

For educators courageous enough to challenge the critics, *Man: A Course of Study* continues to give children a stimulating introduction to the common humanity that all human beings share. *EJ*

⁶ Clyde Kluckhohn. *Mirror for Man*. New York: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1970.

Copyright © 1976 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.