

Scrapping History and Geography: A Response to Paul Schumann

R. Jean Simms-Brown

Eliminating history and geography courses will not improve the social studies program; better teaching will.

Paul F. Schumann¹ says conventional history and geography in grades four through twelve should be discarded. By "conventional" history and geography, Schumann says he means courses that stress memorization of facts, dates, events, mountain ranges, terms, and personalities—"stray pieces of data unrelated to the world in which students will live." On this point he should receive widespread support. There is too much knowledge for knowledge's sake in the school curriculum. However, scrapping history and geography—or scrapping other courses—is not the solution. It is not the courses that are ineffectual but the way they are taught. The logical answer is to revitalize the teaching of these subjects.

Schumann says the average person will never make momentous decisions, so the old saying, "Those who don't know history are destined to repeat the mistakes of the past," does not apply. Everyone makes important personal decisions, and in a democracy all people are expected to help make "momentous" civic choices. Such decisions are seldom reached on the basis of personal experience alone. Perhaps Schumann recognizes that, because he advocates the inclusion of such courses as psychology, philosophy, contemporary cultures, consumer economics, career education, and sociology. *Each of these courses has a history.*

Schumann says he doubts whether persons after twelve years of schooling really know their place in the "grand design." Knowing one's self, one's purposes in life, and one's future goals requires some awareness of the past, present, and future of humankind. Schumann doesn't think history courses are effective for this; he recommends two nine-week blocks of psychology. He also proposes teaching critical thinking skills and consumer economics.

These suggestions represent the strongest argument for not scrapping history and geography. No course can be effective if memorization is the only requirement for passing, but higher levels of thinking skills cannot be developed without the necessary foundations of knowledge. Students must have knowledge in order to understand, apply, synthesize, and evaluate. Using concepts drawn from the political,

¹ Paul F. Schumann, "The Way I See It . . . History and Geography Should be Scrapped," *Educational Leadership* 37 (January 1980): 342.

economic, and social systems, a history teacher can ask analytical questions that guide students to investigate interesting problems—problems that often reveal interrelationships among the social science disciplines.

Suggestions for organizing a better social studies curriculum also deserve some mention. Ninth-grade students would be involved in a unit of simulation activities dealing with political power and democratic decision-making processes, but they would not be introduced to their own government until eleventh or twelfth grade (nine weeks, half of which would be local government). In tenth grade, students would deal with contemporary societies, comparing them with their own society. In order for students to do that they must have mastered other skills, and they must know something about the history and geography of each society studied, including their own. Also in tenth grade, a little regurgitation would be required when students are asked to study the contributions of six or seven presidents. Not until eleventh or twelfth grade would emphasis be placed on logical thinking, although it should have begun in the earliest grades.

Schumann mentions the need to make changes in the social studies curriculum in grades four through twelve but suggests a program only at the high school level. He wants both history and geography to be scrapped yet the article focuses only on history. If conventional history courses are scrapped, will non-conventional ones be retained? Schumann says a variety of elective courses should naturally be available. This new focus, though, would put an end to the conspicuously ineffectual history courses currently offered.² Are all history courses conspicuously ineffectual?

The author raises some questions that have been debated for decades. His work may stimulate useful thought and discussion, especially when many are arguing that the field of education has no historical stability. Rather than following his suggestions, however, we might do better to retain history and geography and to scrap some of the teachers. *ET*

² *Ibid.*, p. 364.



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