

How to Help Students Learn History and Geography

Schools must restore the social studies to their rightful prominence in the curriculum.

It is no wonder that history and geography are not being learned well in our nation's public schools. After all, they are hardly being taught. The social studies have been moved to the curriculum sidelines to clear the way for intense, test-driven instruction in reading, writing, and mathematics. The most important thing schools can do about what students don't know about history and geography is to take these subjects seriously and put them squarely into the school curriculum.

Of course, there are obstacles. First, many teachers, parents, students, and administrators do not grasp the importance of social studies; or, at any rate, they consider social studies understandings less important than reading, writing, and math skills. Second, content selection and sequencing in social studies often is arbitrary and aimless. Too little attention is paid to deciding *which* understandings deserve in-depth study and how they should be arranged across the 13 grades. Third, many schools give other goals—athletic competition, for instance—priority over academic achievement. Fourth, social studies lessons generally lack the depth needed to render them meaningful to students and useful in everyday public life. Nevertheless, the situation is not hopeless.

Schools can take several steps to improve student achievement in social studies.

Emphasize Schools' Civic Mission

Critics of social studies instruction have blamed instructors who are lost to the value of history (Ravitch 1985) or who are more interested in teaching thinking than in teaching anything worth thinking about (Cheney 1987). Both arguments rely on "straw men." Furthermore, they are rhetorical simplifications of an extremely messy problem, a problem that reaches far

into dominant ways of thinking in the United States.

I am referring to three trends that now flourish in our society: privatism, materialism, and technicism. Privatism promotes individualism at the expense of grappling with the dynamic tension between private and public interests. Materialism is expressed when students ask their teacher, "How will knowing history help me get rich?" Technicism fuels the contemporary frenzy of skills instruction with a how-to-do-it mentality that skirts the question, "What is *worth* doing, and why?" These trends are diverting schools from their primary mission: educating for citizenship.

Schools must remember that they are *not* primarily for helping children acquire jobs, get into college, or develop a better self-concept. As worthy as these goals may be, they are less important than the schools' distinctly *civic* mission: to educate students to be capable of—and passionately committed to—meeting the challenges of the democratic way of life.

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Horace Mann asserted the importance of preparing children for participatory democracy in his 1845 plea for common schools:

The great moral attribute of self-government cannot be born and matured in a day, and if children are not trained to it, we only prepare ourselves for disappointment if we expect it from grown men. . . . As the fitting apprenticeship for despotism consists in being trained to despotism, so the fitting apprenticeship for self-government consists in being trained to self-government (Mann 1846).

Mann's words are as relevant to schooling today as when they were first spoken. If we want our children to hold well the office of citizen, to care deeply about the common good, and to exercise good judgment on its behalf, then we are wise to begin their training early and continue it systematically over many years.

Teach Social Studies Every Day in Every Grade

Poor student achievement in history and geography is first and foremost a curriculum problem, not an instructional one. Teachers, parents, curriculum specialists, and program administrators should ascertain what, if any, social studies subject matter is planned and taught in each grade, K-12. They may be surprised to find that no world history is required of secondary students and that many primary teachers skip social studies altogether. Once they have learned the present situation, they should revise the plan as necessary to produce a coherent, rigorous scope-and-sequence guide. Plenty of advice is available. The National Council for the Social Studies has identified three scope-and-sequence guides. The state of California has produced another, and the Bradley Commission (1988) another. All emphasize history and geography, although in different ways and to different degrees.

Teaching to this curriculum plan daily, starting in kindergarten, is imperative. The primary and intermediate grades must provide the foundation on which later learning is erected. The humanities, reading, and writing should be focused on social studies themes. In the

secondary grades, social studies every day in every grade will permit, at a minimum, a full year of world cultural geography, a full year of world history, two full years of U.S. history, and one-semester courses in state history, economics, comparative governments, and, following New York's wise lead, a discussion course focused on tough public controversies.

Make Learning the Palpable Aim of the School

Teaching and learning the planned curriculum must be the school's goal. Often, however, this is not the case. Especially in the upper grades, schools generally serve other purposes. I will mention three. Prominent among the competing purposes is the celebration of athletic challenge. From the morning announcements, which detail team victories, practice schedules, and pep assemblies, to the notorious tradition of favoring faculty applicants who can coach athletic games, academic learning is subjugated to competitive sports.

A second ulterior purpose is social control. Social control has spawned grouping practices that expose only some students to important content and enlightened instruction. In the early grades, students are divided into three groups—for example, canaries, robins, and sparrows. The canaries get the best curriculum, the sparrows the most mundane. By 12th grade, the groups are still intact. Now, the canaries are doing advanced placement coursework, the sparrows are taking auto mechanics or clerical training, and the robins are getting something in between. Such patterns indicate either that remediation was never the goal of these grouping practices, or that schools do not know how to remediate. In addition, social control promotes teaching practices that sacrifice learning goals to management goals. Consider the principal whose chief concern is a smooth-running building or the teacher who reduces complex ideas to easily distributed lists of facts (McNeil 1986).

A third ulterior purpose of schools is the propagation of teen culture.

Open displays of vigorous intellectual effort in school are generally discouraged by the dominant peer culture (and often by adults as well). Often schools are given over to mixing, conforming, courting, clothing displays, team sports, relaxing, and accommodating the after-school job (see, for example, Cusick 1973).

Schools that take seriously the learning of the planned curriculum give attention to two important factors: providing expert personnel and teaching more about less.

Personnel. Teachers and principals must be properly educated for the school's primary aim. At a minimum, elementary teachers should have an undergraduate major in an academic subject; secondary teachers should have an undergraduate major in the fields they teach; and principals should have this and more: an undergraduate major in an academic subject and a graduate degree in an academic subject or in a field of education relevant to leading a school (for instance, curriculum and instruction or educational administration). These requirements should exclude from building leadership those persons whose knowledge base (e.g., athletic competition) is clearly peripheral to the school's central aim.

More on less. Learning should not be confused with covering material. *Covering* is a euphemism in social studies for teaching by mentioning; it implies superficial instruction. *Covering* typically means the teacher tells students a few facts about a person or event and then moves on to telling a few facts about another person or event. This parade-of-facts approach to social studies misrepresents the curriculum plan and undercuts authentic learning. *More on less* means that students will go into greater depth on a limited number of important topics. When topics are studied in depth, lessons can challenge students to perform near the ceiling of their abilities, going beyond the facts gathered to form durable and flexible understandings. Consider one high school student's comments on an opportunity he had to study a topic for at least two weeks:

I got totally immersed in a project when the teacher had us do a paper on some guy. We couldn't pick him, but we had to read at least four books and write at least 100 note cards—big cards—and develop at least a 10-page paper. I got Montaigne. It ended up being real interesting. As Mr. Foster pointed out, it was kind of cool that I got to be a real expert and to know more than millions of people in America about this guy. I'm not sure what made it so interesting—whether it was Montaigne's own works and life or just the fact that I got to know so much about him (Newmann 1988, VI-23).

This student added that he had not been given many of these opportunities:

Much of the time it's a total skim, it's very bad. In one course we covered 2,000 years. Every week we were assigned to cover a 30-page chapter. We had 30 dates a week to memorize. The pity of it is that now I don't remember any of them. I worked so hard, and now basically all I remember is Montaigne.

Selecting which topics should be given sustained attention will require deliberation about which understandings are of most worth. This process will be awkward at first, as content selection in social studies has become a lost art. And, because social studies is lobbied by many interest groups to include their specialized contents, curriculum guidelines typically include so many topics that superficial instruction is practically guaranteed.

It is unfair to impose on teachers alone the awesome task of content selection. Historians, geographers, and political scientists should follow Gagnon's (1988) lead and give some serious attention to this task. Gagnon has suggested four key understandings that students should develop in their studies of U.S. history: the evolution of democratic ideals and practices, the gathering of many diverse groups of people into a nation of immigrants, the economic transformation of the United States from an agrarian to a post-industrial society, and the evolution of the United States' role in the world from quarrelsome colonies to major power.

Improve Instruction

None of the best teaching methods that instructional theory has to offer—from concept formation (Taba et al.

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1971) to reciprocal teaching (Palincsar and Brown 1984)—can overcome a weak curriculum. Nor can they overcome a teacher's weak grasp of the very understandings he or she is trying to help students learn. Nonetheless, instruction is an important element in the school success equation. Without it, the additional time given to important content will be squandered.

Are there general rules of thumb that characterize good instruction in social studies? There are, but they incorporate a tremendous degree of instructional diversity. Clearly, there is no one best way, no magic checklist that evaluators can use when judging lessons. The needed openness to diversity, however, does not excuse teaching practices that are not grounded in theory. Social studies lessons that tread through the all-too-familiar cycle of teacher talk, worksheets, and tests are difficult to justify. Social studies lessons built on firmer ground express a distinct view of teaching and learning: of *learning* not as the warehousing of facts but as the progressive construction of understandings; of *teaching* not as telling facts but as leading a construction project. The teacher acts as a contractor—not actually building a house but

contracting out the sorts of labor that will culminate in a house.

Exceptional teachers do this routinely. One 8th-grade U.S. history teacher, for example, helped her students build an idea of democratic government by contracting out the study of three cases: the U.S., Mexico, and Japan. She assembled for her students information on these cases in readings, films, charts, maps, recitations, and a guest speaker. She assigned additional data-gathering as homework. Then, in jigsaw-style cooperative teams, students researched and dramatized key events surrounding the framing of the three constitutions. Each team group wrote a script and played the roles in a presentation for parents and classmates.

Knowing that understandings are not formed from information alone, even when gathered in such engaging ways as these, this teacher lifted her students' thinking to comparing and contrasting. Students examined similarities and differences among the three governments across several dimensions critical to understanding democracy: the rule of law, popular sovereignty, and civil liberties. In application tasks that followed, students carried their new understanding of democracy to something different from the cases on which they had built it: they were directed to plan and conduct a series of democratic classroom meetings on real school and community problems. These meetings were opportunities for students to practice and refine their understanding of democracy.

This instruction helped students develop in considerable depth an important understanding. It incorporated reading, writing, and the arts as means for in-depth study of key content, not as isolated ends. It presented students with novel challenges for which they could not simply rely on the information they had memorized; using but going beyond it, they manipulated and applied it. The unit's multiple-case design helped bring this about: crisscrossing back and forth among cases, searching for information pertinent to the three dimensions, helped students build a general understanding that

could then be transferred to the novel task—creating and conducting democratic classroom meetings.

In the multiple-case design, cases are the building blocks of understanding, and understandings evolve with exposure to new cases (cf. Chi 1978, Spiro et al. in press). The understanding of democracy that is formed in 5th grade U.S. history lessons is predictably shallow; it probably will be a weak grasp of only one case: the United States. However, this shallow understanding can be deepened in subsequent grades, where additional cases as well as more information on previous cases can be brought to bear. In the 8th grade U.S. history course, as in the above example, students' understanding of democracy can be extended and elaborated with the help of multiple examples with common dimensions. With this foundation, students in the 11th grade U.S. history course would be prepared to grapple with two or three of the Greek and Enlightenment philosophers on whose work our founders relied, as well as later democrats: for example, Andrew Jackson, Walt Whitman, Susan B. Anthony, and Martin Luther King, Jr. The rich model of democracy built up through this constructive repetition across cases and grades can then be put to work and further refined in a senior problems course where public controversies are investigated and policy is recommended to legislators.

The essence of constructive repetition is that students rework a previous understanding. The key advantage for rigorous learning in social studies is that initial learnings are developed and then extended and refined in subsequent studies; a weak conception of democracy (or industrialization or immigration) is first formed and then made stronger. For this reason, careful attention to sequence in curriculum planning is imperative.

California's otherwise interesting new social studies plan is shaky in this respect. In that plan, U.S. history is divided chronologically into thirds, roughly speaking. The first is to be covered primarily in the 5th grade, the second in the 8th, and the third in the 11th. While the intention of planners may have been



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to help teachers and students avoid having to go over the same facts again and again, the plan unfortunately appears to be based on a less-than-rigorous conception of learning as the warehousing of facts. It will likely discourage the progressive construction of key ideas.

Make Participatory Citizenship Part of the Curriculum

Finally, I recommend that participatory citizenship be made a regular part of school life. We can improve achievement in social studies by affording students firsthand experiences of civic life that they can incorporate into their evolving understandings of rule by law, popular sovereignty, public policy, and the like.

Three forms of participatory citizenship are basic to the social studies curriculum—and they are feasible. One is democratic classroom and school meetings. Here real problems of school life are discussed openly and perhaps resolved. Meanwhile, students are learning the arts of discussion on public controversies and the challenge of formulating fair and wise public policy. JoAnn Shaheen of the South Orangetown schools in New York has produced impressive results even with primary grade students (Shaheen in press). The problems children bring to these meetings range from identifying how to sched-

ule care for classroom animals to deciding how to deal with a name-caller and how to spend proceeds of a school fund-raiser. As in the civic world outside of school, these are real issues involving value conflicts, insufficient information, compromise, people who dominate discussions and those who will not participate, cultural differences, and the tension between private wants and the common good.

A second form of participatory citizenship also relies on open and disciplined discussion as the heart of civic life, but deals with academic controversies rather than controversies drawn from school life. Johnson and Johnson (1988) have laid out procedures for planning and conducting such discussions in secondary grades. Issues can range from deciding in a U.S. history class whether the Constitution was really needed (many good citizens opposed it) to deciding in a world history class on the issue of the suitability of democracy in modern-day China.

A third form draws discussion topics from contemporary public controversies. This form can easily be constituted as a senior problems course. New York State has taken major steps in this direction with its new Participation in Government course (Parker in press). All three forms of participatory citizenship provide fundamental experience in the daily practice of democracy, namely, public talk about public problems.

Schools Can't Do Everything

Obviously, schools cannot do everything about what students do not know about social studies. In fact, a school's effectiveness is severely limited. The home curriculum matters more than the school curriculum. If the principals of the home curriculum—parents and guardians—do their job well, then a foundation for school success is laid, on top of which school principals can do theirs. If the home principals fail to lay this foundation, as is predictably the case when they are themselves children or illiterate adults, then there is not a lot the school principal can do.

In a school where learning is the primary goal, parents will be encouraged to create programs by which the home curriculum can be improved. Some ingredients of a home curriculum that foster school success are plenty of talking, reading, and writing, both for pleasure and for everyday purposes; structured use of home time; a quiet place to study; a substantial block of time daily for study; and emphasis on good conduct (for example, persistence and civic-mindedness over immediate gratification of individual wants). Such an initiative by parents, by which the whole parent community is mobilized to create home conditions that support school success, would be invaluable. While ambitious, it surely is not an unreasonable expectation.

But Schools Can Do Something

I have recommended that schools concentrate on their civic mission, without which other purposes are vacuous, and that history and geography be taught every day in every grade. Instruction on reading and writing, as well as personnel selection practices, must be put to the service of these ends. Furthermore, our preoccupation with athletics must be brought swiftly and sharply under control. Schools can't do everything about what our students don't know, but they *can* do these things. It will be a pity if they do not. □

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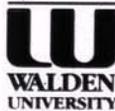
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