

Social Studies

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The Newest Reform Proposal

Hot on the heels of the Bradley Commission's *Building a History Curriculum* and California's *History-Social Science Framework* comes the report of the National Commission on Social Studies in the Schools: *Charting a Course: Social Studies for the 21st Century*. In this report, the commission recommends that history and geography form the center of the social studies curriculum. And, like the other reform proposals, the commission stresses the importance of teaching history and geography even in the primary grades. As we learned in the 1980s, pressures to teach reading and arithmetic can overwhelm the curriculum in these early grades, effectively pushing social studies of any sort out of the school day.

The commission's unique twist on the common social studies scope and sequence is also its most interesting recommendation: merge American and world history in the high school. Envisioned is a three-year sequence, grades 9–11:

9th grade: world and American history and geography to 1750. Emphasized here are major civilizations, beginning with a review of hunting and gathering societies, and the transition to agriculture.

10th grade: same, 1750–1900. Three transformations of modern times are emphasized: the rise of democracy, the industrial revolution, and population growth and mobility.

11th grade: same, since 1900. Students study how the three transformations were expressed in the 20th century.

The commission's report shares one central strength with the Bradley and California plans: movement toward identifying a limited quantity of *essential* content that all students should learn. Rather than skimming over the surface of innumerable topics, schools are urged to provide each student

access to core subject matter.

The report also shares a debilitating flaw with those two plans: Its goal statement and its curriculum contradict one another. *Critical* understandings of history and geography and *critical* attitudes "appropriate to analysis of the human condition" are set out as goals along with *participatory* citizenship. But the actual curriculum recommended could not by any stretch of the imagination achieve such goals: Generally, students are to absorb loads of geography and narrative history for 12 years.

Why the contradiction? It probably stems from the fact that this report, along with the Bradley and California proposals, appears to have ignored decades of scholarship that concentrates on this contradiction, analyzing and trying to overcome it.¹ Recall, for example, the Problems of Democracy course recommended by a 1916 social studies commission for the 12th year of school to give students an opportunity to tackle pressing public problems "of vital importance to society and of immediate interest to the pupil." In this way, students would critically *use*, and thereby refine and develop further, the knowledge they had acquired of history and the social sciences.

Or recall the issue-centered curriculums developed in the 1950s and

'60s. Junior- and senior-high school students studied actual historical documents pertaining to controversial episodes in history (for example, the American Revolution, the rise of organized labor), comparing and contrasting competing accounts. Meanwhile, they discussed the enduring public issues that were at the heart of the episodes (for example: Is violence ever the proper way to pursue social change? In what ways should the power of an employer be restricted by law?). By comparing the way an issue is expressed and dealt with in a particular historical episode to the way it is expressed and dealt with today, students were not only learning history but learning to learn from history—drawing and criticizing historical parallels.

This makes good sense. If we want social studies education to improve students' critical judgment, which the proposals' goal statements typically expound, shouldn't students be provided opportunities to *exercise* critical judgment?

Issue-centered history education arguably is the strongest social studies curriculum model developed in the 20th century. And it has the broadest research base. Had the commission done its homework more thoroughly, and not resigned itself merely to produce another variation on the scope-and-sequence theme, it would have found the best attempt to date to overcome the very hole it fell into head over heels: the tired contradiction between social studies goals and social studies practice. □

If we want to improve critical judgment, shouldn't students exercise critical judgment?

¹See R. W. Evans, (1989). "A Dream Unrealized: A Brief Look at the History of Issue-Centered Approaches," *The Social Studies* 80: 178–184. Also: W. C. Parker, (November 1990). "Assessing Citizenship," *Educational Leadership* 48: 17–22.

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