Implications of Changes in Readings in a Social Studies Graduate Class for Curriculum and Instruction: Two Scenarios

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This article describes two scenarios and changes made to a graduate readings course in social studies education over two years in order to align it with constructivist and student-centered thinking and learning. The changes made, the rationale for the changes, and the results are discussed.

Introduction

A few years ago I inherited a Readings in Social Studies Education graduate class. The class was designed to encourage K-12 social studies teachers to read more in their teaching area(s) to deepen their knowledge base. While the area of highest interest to most social studies teachers is history, social studies in Michigan also includes geography, economics, political science (civics and government), as well as psychology and sociology. My predecessor chose a few solid books he deemed worthwhile for students who then read them, discussed them, and reflected in class on the books’ significance. This was a good plan, but being a constructivist educator, I wanted my students to have more choice in the books they read and more opportunities to discuss them.

Background, Philosophy, and Definitions

This year starts my 41st year of teaching. I was fortunate to have Rolly Faunce (Faunce & Munshaw, 1964) and Morrell Clute (1968), who were disciples of Earl Kelly (1947), as my instructors, advisers, and mentors during my graduate years at Wayne State University in Detroit. They were practitioners of the group process and believers in student-centered learning. Having experienced learning in groups and given choices in my graduate education by them, I became a follower. Group work, now usually called cooperative learning, has been more highly developed as a theory and researched by Roger and David Johnson (1997) for over 30 years. They explain their basic tenets:

Cooperative learning differs from traditional classroom grouping in that it requires that teachers carefully structure the group so that students believe they

(a) sink or swim together,

(b) assist and encourage others to achieve,

(c) are individually accountable for doing their part of the group’s work,

(d) have to master the required interpersonal and small group skills to be an effective group member, and

(e) should discuss how well the group is working and what could be done to improve the group work. (¶ 3)

Does cooperative learning work? As a result of their extensive research, Roger and David
Johnson (2002) concluded:

Cooperative learning is proven to be an enormously effective method for learning. It allows and encourages students to explain what they are learning to each other, learn each other’s point of view, give and receive support from classmates, and help each other dig below the superficial level of understanding of the material they are learning. It also leads to greater acceptance of differences based on ability, ethnic background, and gender. It provides a structure for resolving conflict through negotiation and is being used to reduce school violence. (p. 2)

While there are many descriptions of constructivism and an exact definition may be difficult as discussed by Null (2001), I believe that a constructivist teacher is one who allows students to construct their own knowledge (within boundaries) from opportunities they have in a class as active participants rather than as passive learners.

Both cooperative learning and constructivist learning give students choices. However, many teachers (and administrators) believe that giving students choices about their learning means turning the school over to the students who will then want to make all the decisions. Alfie Kohn (1993) discusses this and other problematic perceptions, approaches, and benefits of student self-determination. Kohn names three barriers to making students active participants in K-12 education: (a) structural impediments by schools or school districts, who want to be highly controlling, (b) resistance by teachers, unwilling to share their authority or power, and (c) student resistance. Interestingly, not only do some teachers believe students cannot make decisions but also that students often do not trust themselves. According to Kohn, this may be primarily due to their experiences of doing what they are told in school—to not question authority. My concern is that, whether they are in high school or college, today’s students are the citizens to whom we will be entrusting our future. They will soon need to start making decisions for themselves on issues like candidates for office, how to spend (save?) money, or the books they read for my class. Alfie Kohn (1993) lists five benefits of student choice or self-determination:

- People who have a sense of control over their lives feel better about themselves and others.
- If children and young adults are to learn self-discipline, they need to practice it in school.
- Students who learn in a democratic atmosphere are more successful.
- Teachers who share power find their job more interesting and enjoyable.
- Allowing students to make decisions about their learning has more intrinsic value than trying to control them.

It is within these frameworks of constructivist learning and cooperative learning that I started to make changes in my graduate social studies class. While keeping the attendance policy and the grading of the written reviews constant, I twice rearranged the dynamics of the class. The first intervention was to allow students more choice in their reading selections. The second intervention was to have students discuss their books in a variety of group settings devised by me.

The First Intervention

My first inclination was to allow students to choose any five books they wanted to read in the social studies disciplines. This was a step in the right direction, but they (and I) needed more structure to their reading. I had found, for example, my history teachers usually loved history so much they would read only books in history. While this is a good thing, I
wanted them to read wider. As a result, I still assigned the same number of books with a minimum of 100 pages, but within this structure, students were instructed to choose one from the following genres:

- biography or autobiography,
- historical fiction,
- non-fiction,
- books about someone from another culture, and
- a fifth book that could be about any social studies topic.

While this structure would allow a history teacher to read in his or her field, it would also push the boundaries.

Since the students are certified teachers, the content (ideas or direct use) of at least three of the books should be appropriate for use in their classroom. All of these details were included in a written review of the book, in three pages or less, which contained a summary, a critique, and a strategy for using some or all of the content in their classroom. Each student was instructed to send his or her written review in electronic form to the other students, and a paper copy was turned in the day of the class.

In class, students only needed to review and discuss their five books; consequently, we met only five times after the first class for a total of six rather than the customary 14 sessions. When the 25-30 students came to class, they were prepared to tell in 5-10 minutes their book’s highlights and how the contents were relevant to today.

**Results of the First Intervention**

Having students share the books they had read with the class was successful according to the comments made during class and in their anonymously written comments at the end of the semester as a part of the Student Evaluations of Teaching (SET) on the last day of class. Students stated how they liked to be in front of the class, were pleased to be able to choose their books, liked sharing them with the class, and enjoyed the class. Furthermore, my SET scores were very good, averaging 4.1 out of a possible five (4.1/5.0).

However, my class was sitting and listening to 30 five-minute talks about various books. There was no time for in-depth discussions; class members would often get restless and find excuses to leave at the break, and I was bored. We needed more time for discussion.

**Lessons Learned and Affirmed from the First Intervention**

Too many times high school teachers teach what is in the curriculum guide without making it relevant to their students. I believe it is imperative for teachers to relate the curriculum to the present. Too often, social studies teaching, especially in a secondary classroom, is only the voice from the front of the class. By involving all learners, everyone is a winner. When students become involved, learning goes up and teaching problems decline (Rogers, 1969). I had involved all the students in front of the class; now I needed to find a way to increase the discussions. Some additional changes could make the class more interactive. This led to the second intervention.

**Intervention II**

In the fall 2006, after one round of stand and talk by individuals, I had students form groups to discuss their books, and the students became more engaged. These groups are what Roger and David Johnson (1997) call informal cooperative learning groups: groups which meet for only a part of a class or for one day. Last year (2007), I refined the process even further using their philosophy.
The first week I had students form groups and discuss their books, including their explanation of the content’s relevance to today. I roamed around the room observing the discussions and adding comments when appropriate. The individual groups decided which student had the most novel or interesting way of using the book in his or her class. After a break, the groups reported their decision to the entire class.

Since I believe in diversity and because during the first week most of the females sat in one group, the second week I had the groups form by gender equity. There were approximately 10 females in a class of 30, so the 5 groups had to have 2 women in each group. Once in groups, they discussed their books and decided which book in the group sounded the most interesting and the one they would want to read for themselves.

The third week we did a variation of speed dating: speed book reviews. Similar to speed dating, the students, sitting in pairs instead of discussing themselves, talked about their book for two minutes each. After four minutes, they switched seats and talked to another classmate until everyone had talked to all the other members of the class. After the class had a break, I held a debriefing and asked the students how they felt about sharing their books in this way. The comments were very positive.

By the fourth book review, there were some grumblings from a few of the class members about the credit given for the written reviews. Most graduate students can write well; some are passable, and a few need to improve their writing, so we did peer editing. Students sat in pairs with their backs to each other and wrote comments on a separate sheet of paper on the other’s written review, offering constructive criticism, checking spelling and grammar, but not assigning a grade or credit. Then they faced each other and discussed their editorial comments. After the discussions, the original authors of the reviews assigned what they thought their individual credit should be, using a range of 1-15 points, and they then submitted their work and suggested grade to me. Students were not easy on themselves. I accepted the credit as they assigned it.

The fifth and final review was similar to the first one with self-assigned groups of five students who discussed their books with each other.

Results of the Second Intervention

One may ask, does this work? My personal observations, the comments made in class, and student comments on the anonymously written responses of the SET point to the answer of an emphatic “Yes.” In addition, since I changed the book discussion format to groups, the last SET scores averaged 4.7/5.0, an increase of .6/5, over 10%.

Similar positive results in a college organic chemistry class were reported by F. Michelle Jones-Wilson (2005). In her two-semester class, she combined brief lectures and group-centered problem-solving based on the material assigned to be read before class. While the students wrestled with chemistry problems in their groups, she circulated around the room acting as a coach. This was usually followed by a question and answer session to clarify what was not understood by the students. While the subject matter and the actual process differed, the result remains the same: When working in groups, students take more responsibility for their learning.

Lessons Learned

Students placed in random as well as structured groups described above can work to the enjoyment of the students and advance their learning. Not only did they have more time to share their enthusiasm about the books they read, but they also heard the same from other students. This would hopefully encourage them to read another book in an area of their interest.

One sidebar to the group discussions: Many times during the semester, I would
notice, as I walked around the room, that a group had finished their book discussions and had moved to more personal discussions about where they teach and sometimes about job openings. While all of my students were certified, there were always social studies teachers who are looking for a job. These informal talks lead to peer networking and some teacher placements.

Even though course evaluations were stellar, one should reflect on course strengths and weaknesses in order to improve and enhance learning. Helping students enjoy their class experience is an added benefit to their learning. Since I plan to teach the class again this fall, I look forward to repeating the process with an eye to keeping what works and changing what needs to be improved. For example, the sexual balance of the class may be different, so I will have to find another way to form groups rather than by gender allocation as described in the second week.

What Did the Students Read?

The students read a great variety of books. Besides biographies like John Adams by John McCullough and histories such as Hiroshima, by John Hershey, examples of their choices are as follows: Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe (the impact of European missionaries on African tribal life), Huey Long by Harry T. Williams, Holler If You Hear Me by Michael Eric Dyson (the life and times of the rapper Tupac Shakur), and Fast Food Nation by Eric Schlosser. It is always an eclectic mix.

One important note, the references to the books at the end of the reviews have been consolidated over the years into a reading list of over 400 books which is available online to current students in the class and to former students who wish to reference it after they are done with the class. A link to the book list is available through the link to the class in the biographical statement for this article.

Summary

Over a few years time and in two stages, I changed the format of Readings in Social Studies Education graduate class from students reading a few solid books deemed worthwhile by the instructor to having students not only choose their own books but also having more time provided in class to discuss them in groups. According to all indicators, both formal and informal evaluation, each step in the process not only gave students more choices in their learning but also allowed them to share their knowledge in groups and to enjoy the class. As one student stated in an anonymous class evaluation, “Going to the group format seemed to work better. It provided a forum for us to interact with each other, to ask more questions, and really delve into books.”

References


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