Reclaiming Generalizations in Social Studies Education

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This article argues that the teaching of generalizations in today’s social studies classrooms is seldom done well, if at all, and that it is time to reestablish this strategy as part of the everyday practice of social studies teachers. The authors review the history and value of generalizations in the classroom and provide some practical applications and examples of their use. The case is made that such practice will not only enhance the vibrancy of social studies classes and increase student interest, but will also enhance understanding of the content and improve the development of citizenship skills.

Introduction

The teaching of generalizations in social studies classrooms is seldom done well and often not done at all (Benson, 1998; McKinney & Edgington, 1997). Yet, the skill and activity of generalization-making is essential in secondary education, and we take the position that it is time to reclaim and reassert this powerful instructional and democratizing tool. To that end, we first explore competing and contested definitions of generalizations in order to cinch together and clearly describe what we mean by generalization production. We then outline the utility and value of student-constructed generalizations, not only within the social studies but also within the larger school experience. Finally, we explore some practical applications and examples of generalization-making as well as provide descriptive remarks on how to modify practice to maximize and leverage the rich educative value of generalizations.

The field seems to have largely turned away from generalizations as a pervasive and fundamental learning activity, particularly at the elementary and middle school level. This turn is partly due to the changing nature of social studies in schools, as suggested within a growing number of regional studies (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Doppen, Misco, & Patterson, 2008; Heafner, Lipscomb, & Rock, 2006; Rock, et al., 2006; VanFossen, 2005) which contend that social studies education is more frequently marginalized within the context of high-stakes testing that often privileges reading, writing, math, and science. The cursory focus on declarative knowledge delivered through direct instruction, even when standards speak to more inquiry-oriented and constructivist approaches, serves to undermine time spent on producing and testing generalizations. The omnipresence of testing and standards instead diverts attention toward fact mastery (Benson, 1998) rather than a focus on skills or dispositions (Misco, 2007). There is certainly nothing wrong with factual knowledge. Facts are, after all, an essential foundation for knowledge and understanding. But they do not, in and of themselves, provide meaningful understanding, nuance, or applicability for novel situations. If our true aim is the preparation of democratic citizens, we need to consciously re-focus social studies experiences so that students use facts, in a pragmatic fashion, to produce and test generalizations.

In addition, generalizations in the social studies lack a sense of clarity. This may be attributed to the lack of discussion of generalizations in the social studies literature over the past few decades. Interest in using generalizations as an instructional tool for the teaching of social studies was widely discussed up to and
through the New Social Studies Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, but since that time, it has suffered waning interest (McKinney & Edginton, 1997).

Conceptualizing Generalizations

But what, exactly, is meant when one refers to a generalization? Moreover, why are these so seldom addressed in the social studies? In short, what is their purpose and value? How do generalizations connect with the purpose of the social studies of promoting democratic citizenship? In order to fully respond to these questions, we first begin by establishing the relationship of generalizations to other educative parts.

The Place of Generalizations

In order to properly discuss the use and misuse of generalizations, we first define facts and concepts, for they constitute an essential foundation for producing generalizations in social studies. To do this, we begin at the point most pre-service teachers begin, with their methods textbooks. As an initial point of departure, we submit the following definitions:

Fact: a specific and often isolated piece of information that is believed to be true and which can be confirmed by empirical evidence.

Concept: an idea used to organize a class of objects or experiences, typically one or two words, which may be concrete (dog, chair) or abstract (love, justice).

Generalization: a statement of a relationship between two or more concepts. It is believed to be true and applies to similar situations regardless of time, space, and culture. This statement may be used as a tool for prediction and is often framed as an if/then statement.

Given the dangers of isolated content, we contend that facts and concepts are valuable in social studies education only insofar as they contribute to the production of generalizations.

Yet the definition of a generalization is the one most widely misunderstood. To test this phenomenon, try the following exercise in your classroom. Place your students in groups and assign each group one of the following social science content areas: history, civics, geography, or economics. Then ask each group to define fact, concept, and generalization and provide specific examples of each within their assigned content area. Likely, you will find the following trends:

- Students will have little problem defining a fact, though the part about it being specific and isolated piece of information may not be noted;

- They will have an overall understanding of a concept, though they may have some difficulty defining it precisely, and many groups will be able to come up with a number of concepts related to their discipline;

- Students will have either no real grasp of what a generalization is or they will define it incorrectly, likely in a negative manner, and struggle to find any good examples of one as it relates to their assigned content area.

Differing Conceptualizations of Generalization

The discussion of generalizations is not new to the social studies. Debate on the best use of generalizations in the social studies is found as early as 1929 (Billings). Tyler (1949), Brownell and Hendrickson (1950), and Hanna (1957) all defined generalizations in broad terms, implying the connection of concepts to allow for transfer to new settings (Burlbaw,
Buser and Rooze (1970) defined a generalization as “a statement that indicates a relationship between two or more concepts and has broad applicability in space and time” (p. 129), and Tirrell (1984) defined a generalization as “a universally applicable statement at the highest level of abstraction, and it is relevant to all times, persons, and places” (p. 15). In each case is the criterion of predictive transference. Statements bounded in the past or restricted to a particular time or setting or group of people could not lay claim to be generalizations. Some scholars refer to statements such as those as “sub-generalizations” (Tirrell, 1984) or distinguish between those generalizations that are nomothetic in nature and those that are not (Hunt & Metcalf, 1968). Nomothetic generalizations, perhaps the highest order of generalizations, have “predictive-explanatory power” and have some sense of “universal validity” (Hunt & Metcalf, 1968, p. 148).

For example, Tirrell (1984) stated that a generalization connecting the concepts of revolution and leadership might be that one “characteristic of a successful revolution is dynamic, forceful, leadership of the dissident group” (p. 15). An example of a sub-generalization on the same topic is “An important reason why the Russian Revolution was successful was that Lenin and Trotsky provided capable leadership for the dissatisfied workers, peasants, and members of the armed forces.” Similarly, Hunt and Metcalf (1968) gave the nomothetic example “the religious art of all peoples and periods has always been the expression in visual form of their belief in unseen supernatural powers governing their lives and destinies” (p. 146). But the statement, “It is more probable that geographic features (rather than race) determined the kind of settlement the peasants of medieval Europe made” was a generalization that did not qualify as such.

For the sake of simplicity and to help assure that students get it, we recommend making a clear distinction between sub-generalizations and generalizations in the social studies classroom. That is, any statements that include a reference to a specific time (“during the late 1800s”), place (“in the American West”), or culture (“Native Americans often . . .”) should not be accepted as a generalization. We recognize that many of the characteristics of generalizations can be found in such statements, but the application of these is specific to a particular area, time, or people and almost always stated in a past tense form. It is important for students to know the difference and be able to distinguish these from the broader and more transferable use of the term generalization.

**Applicability and Universality**

There also remains the question as to whether or not generalizations must always hold true. Our position is that to the extent to which they do hold true in similar situations, the more valuable they serve as generalizations. To say, “Due to scarcity, whenever a choice is made, an opportunity cost is involved” is an example of a generalization that always holds true, independent of time, space, or culture. But must this always be the case for a generalization to be useful? Not really. The statement that “historically, large or important cities have developed along major bodies of water” would still be a useful generalization, though not true in all cases across time, space, and culture. Therefore, what we find then is that generalizations exist along a continuum between “always true” to “almost always true” with the understanding that the less often the generalization is universally true, the less powerful it is as a generalization.

**The Value of Constructing Generalizations**

The use of generalizations is not uncommon in content areas outside of the social studies. For example, a science teacher may want his or her students to learn that if plants are placed near a light source, they will, over
time, bend toward the light. In math, students may learn that if one has a triangle containing a right angle, the area of the square whose side opposite the right angle is equal to the sum of the areas of the squares whose sides are the two sides that meet at the right angle. Such knowledge is transferable to like settings across time, space, and culture.

Similar to math and science, generalizations in the social studies allow students to apply what they have learned to new settings and to transfer prior knowledge to new situations, both within the social studies curriculum and new situations outside of the classroom. For example, when students learn that “a characteristic of a successful revolution is dynamic, forceful, leadership of the dissident group,” students can take this generalization, test it, and see if it applies to future similar situations that may be studied, including the French, Russian, or Iranian Revolutions. Or, if students learn that “people immigrate in order to improve their quality of life,” they can then test and apply this generalization within mul-tiple units during the school year: Does this apply to the Pilgrims and 19th century immigrants? Does it apply to today’s immigrants?

Of course, the valuable outcome of this experience is not necessarily students understanding characteristics of revolutions, but rather, the instructional aims are met through producing generalizations including thinking critically, employing inductive and deductive thinking, thinking reflectively, and addressing current issues, problems, and situations. The necessary condition for students to arrive at a generalization is the ability to apply concepts and facts to their production and subsequent testing of tentative generalizations. By applying these concepts, students are demonstrating understanding (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998) rather than knowledge. Understanding, in the sense that Dewey (1933) proposed, pertains to parts of information as grasped in their relations to each other which comes about through reflection upon the meaning of what is studied. It is this sort of understanding that, when coupled with other emerging understandings, becomes the essence of informed decision making which all citizens need to master.

Generalization production is uniquely suited to bring about transferability of these understandings to other settings and novel situations. If our learning experiences do not have the potential to offer transferability, then instruction is largely “futile” (Hunt & Metcalf, 1968, p. 155). Generalization production focuses the attention of teachers and students not on the ends of learning but rather on the means. The difference here is reflected in testing priorities. If we seek to measure students’ knowledge of facts, then we privilege the end process—what can most easily be discerned. Generalizations, however, bring our attention to the production and testing of tentative universals, which are good only insofar as the methods by which they were produced. This means-focused learning and assessment encourages the active construction of knowledge, student-centered classrooms, and citizenship-focused lessons.

**Practical Applications for Teaching**

Certain disciplines within the social studies rely more heavily on concepts and generalizations than others. If one were to ask someone studying economics to name some key concepts, many would come to mind: scarcity, opportunity cost, supply and demand, marginal returns, choices, production, consumption, distribution, and trade. After proper instruction, students can give examples of generalizations, such as “In a capitalistic society, if all other factors remain the same, an increase in demand will have the effect of increasing price.” Or, perhaps they state that “standards of living increase as the productivity of labor improves.” Why is this so? Is it because economics lends itself to generalizations more easily? Perhaps, but we would argue otherwise. It is because economics is taught through the use of concepts and generalizations. Indeed, it would seem problematic to do it any other way. Perhaps this should be the default position of all
of the social studies content areas. Then we can ensure that what is learned is transferable and applicable to new situations. As a result, true assimilation and accommodation of concepts can be developed and content can be used and understood.

In contrast to economics, world history often seems to be taught through the use of facts. For example, asking students to memorize the key tenets of the Treaty of Versailles will likely bring forth pervasive classroom ennui. Instead, we might ask whether treaties following wars serve to directly bring about other wars due to reparations, punitive measures, lack of enforcement, diminished autonomy, or a host of other reasons. Students can then analyze the facts of the case and test the generalization to see if it might be considered to be true independent of time or place.

For example, the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) ended the Thirty Years’ War with a diminished Hapsburg power within Europe and an emergence of a balance of power with its center of gravity shifting away from Central to Eastern Europe. Attempting to reverse part of that shift following the Napoleonic Wars, the Congress of Vienna (1814) included a settlement of compensation—those countries contributing to Napoleon’s defeat were awarded territories. This process continued with the Treaty of Frankfort (1871) which awarded not only territory to Germany, but also a massive indemnity and military occupation of France. Thus, when we finally get to the Versailles Treaty (1919), perhaps its vindictiveness makes more sense. Surrendering land and paying massive reparations may have been contextually rational given the historical antecedents. After sufficient study, students might be confronted with a predictive question concerning the treaties signed after WWII and the degree to which they conformed to the aforementioned tentative generalization. More importantly, once these generalizations are fully baked, students may begin to apply them to both today and the future as they think about what should be the case for constructing treaties within current instances of discord.

Conclusion

We claim here that the teaching of generalizations in social studies classrooms, with the exception of economics, is seldom done well and often not done at all. In addition, we argued that generalization-making is essential in secondary schools as a powerful instructional and democratizing tool. By employing generalization-making as a central curricular and instructional bit, we contend that powerful social studies teaching and learning will arise.

Generalization-making naturally invites active and challenging lessons that are inquiry-based. As students work to produce and then test generalizations across the unique particularities of their subject matter, they take a central role in their own learning within a discovery paradigm. Too often, social studies teachers feel the pressure of standards and testing nudge them into cursory coverage, rather than deep exploration where they might harness the explanatory powers of the discipline for citizenship education. Generalization-making requires attention to all of the same academic content standards that would normally be addressed, but through a different and more meaningful route.

By reconceptualizing social studies classrooms in this way, we are also responding to the generational malaise that has faced the field: Students are disinterested in the subject. Many perceive history within social studies classes to be dull, irrelevant, and boring (Chiodo & Byford 2004; Schug, Todd, & Beery, 1986), especially when they are exposed to social studies classes that contain disconnected ideas, dates, and facts organized in such a way that meaning is weak or nonexistent. Not only does a focus on generalizations have the promise to enhance the vibrancy of classes and student interest, but it also has potential to raise test scores through enhanced understandings of the content and improve the
development of citizenship skills and dispositions.

References


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