With increased curricular and classroom demands, teaching social studies content and skills can be challenging, especially in elementary schools. Although educators are encouraged to promote critical thinking, collaboration and problem solving, classroom time is increasingly spent preparing students to pass state-mandated tests that emphasize factual recall. This article highlights the importance of self-study through the praxis of one teacher educator. To address the shifting instructional and professional demands, she modified and updated an elementary social studies methods course over a five-year period. Through analysis of documents, observations, and students’ feedback, the methods course and student learning outcomes changed significantly over time. This article addresses the need for social studies teacher educators to re-evaluate their own praxis, as some existing teacher education program models and course programs do not address today’s changing teaching and learning climates. Deliberate self-study, coupled with professional collaborations across school and university boundaries, can be key steps to improve learning outcomes for all.

Key Words: collaboration in instruction, professional development, self-study, social studies teaching

Introduction

The task of preparing today’s pre-service and veteran social studies professionals is a challenging one, especially in an educational climate of high stakes testing and accountability (Grant, 2007). Particularly at the elementary level, school administrators often
direct teachers to include social studies as a core curricular element. Yet, the number of teaching minutes and opportunities to implement social studies lessons in many elementary schools has dropped in some states in recent years, in part due to administrative pressures on teachers to emphasize other content areas and because of increased teaching time for standardized test-taking skills (Rock, Heafner, Oldendorf, Passe, O’Connor, Good & Byrd, 2006; Van Fossen, 2005).

Instructors of pre-service teachers at colleges and universities face other professional development issues. Questions being considered include, “What social studies content, skills and test-taking strategies should be emphasized today?” “What factors guide teaching and learning decisions, given the increased emphasis on content recall?” and “What criteria can maintain academic rigor in coursework and also prepare teacher candidates for the realities of the field?”

This article attempts to address the questions with findings from a five-year self-study project. As a teacher educator at a large state university, I have engaged in a structured evaluation process that has examined my teaching, reflection, and relevant research. Rather than remaining rooted in the models of initial teacher certification training, my praxis is now multi-layered and includes increased attention to content integration, varied instructional procedures, use of a variety of assessment tools, and a purposeful infusion of diversity and global issues into course objectives. The first section of this article describes the study’s current social studies teaching and learning setting. In the next section, findings and emerging themes from the study are identified, and finally, areas for future study are suggested.

Examing Our Social Studies Roots

The nature and role of self-study in the teacher education profession has received increased attention in recent years. Amanda Berry (2004) acknowledges that the practice of describing, measuring, and interpreting one’s praxis is “still in its infancy [and] not yet truly developed as an institution approach” (p. 1304) in the field. Whether attempted by classroom teachers, educators at colleges and universities, or educational administrators, this emerging field of research is still being defined. As such, its boundaries and elements vary in published scholarship (Beck, Freese, & Kosnik, 2004). It is worthy of study, however, because of the implications that such ‘personal’ yet ‘collaborative’ work has on our students and our ability to prepare them for the changing educational scene (Russell, 2006). For this article, the phenomenon of ‘self in teaching’ is a guide to explain how I teach and to make meaning of new found knowledge and experiences in that process (Baird, 2004).

The Social Studies Elementary Curriculum

In our state, social studies has a distinctive place in the elementary curriculum. From grades kindergarten through five, children are expected to recall and comprehend knowledge in four key disciplines: history, civics, geography, and economics (see Table 1).

“[H]ow will this planning decision stand the test of time given different learning standards, changing educational policies, and the diverse interests of the students and school community.”
Table 1. Sample Virginia Standards of Learning (VA-SOL) Topics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Grades K-3</th>
<th>Grades 4-5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>History</strong></td>
<td>Americans in history</td>
<td>Virginia: Land and its inhabitants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Events and holidays</td>
<td>Colonization and Conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ancient civilizations</td>
<td>Civil War era (pre and post)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exploration of the Americas</td>
<td>Virginia: Past and present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Civics</strong></td>
<td>Modeling civic behavior</td>
<td>Key ideas of Jefferson and Mason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identifying (civic) symbols</td>
<td>“Jim Crow” and segregation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recognizing diversity</td>
<td>VA in national history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Geography</strong></td>
<td>Location and direction</td>
<td>Five themes of geography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relationship with places</td>
<td>Regions (physical)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Map and globe skills</td>
<td>Environmental/global awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Economics</strong></td>
<td>Distinguish wants vs. needs</td>
<td>Bartering and trading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Making choices/scarcity</td>
<td>Careers (working relationships)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opportunity cost</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Teacher Preparation Program

The college of education program prepares students for teaching positions in grades Pre-K through 12, or for work as researchers and teacher educators in higher education arenas. As with many traditional preparation programs, the majority (85%) is female with approximately 14 % representing racial and ethnic minority groups. Nearly all entered the program directly from high school. Few have full-time or extended work experience, but some have participated in study-abroad and summer enrichment activities and courses. Psychology is the most popular social science major, followed by history. After graduation, most seek initial placements in local or regional public schools. A few are hired in international teaching settings or school sites to teach students of a different race, culture or economic status than their own. Since 2005, many more students have inquired about receiving training to teach English as a Second Language (ESOL).

The Process of ‘Looking Back’

Over a five-year period, I have gathered information from several sources including course syllabi, journals of course plans, lesson notes, and senior colleagues’ peer observations. Each semester, I also have discussed lesson plans and outcomes with former middle school teaching colleagues and members of a state professional educators’ association. Feedback from teacher supervisors in the schools has been especially insightful. To gather results of students’ learning outcomes and attitudes, I developed pre-test, formative and post-test measures. Students completed a survey information sheet administered on the first and last days of class to assess changes in their ideas of content knowledge and technology proficiency over the 14-week class term. At midterm, they completed an essay exam to measure comprehension and application of subject content and standards prior to development of a social studies unit. Throughout the semester, they also posted reflective comments on an on-line list-serv. At the end of the course, students completed a grade-level themed unit that required at least one lesson demonstration of technology integration, either for teacher or student use. The data were coded and evaluated to identify specific patterns, processes and develop generalizations to inform praxis (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Today’s Social Studies Teaching

Whether states mandate or ignore curricular goals and objectives, social studies teacher educators must still make important decisions on: (1) how to plan the scope and sequence of their course content, (2) what content to teach or omit, and (3) how to assess students’ content mastery. For the first decision, one key conceptual framework that complements social studies instruction is Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe’s (1998) ‘backwards design.’ The model is based on identifying essential questions to guide students to a long-term retention and understanding (of content and skills) that is supported by reasoning and evidence. The intent is to identify one key question to ground the lesson and incorporate higher-level thinking and problem solving skills while addressing grade-level content directives. Ideally, by ‘starting with the end in mind’ to determine the long-term learning outcome (Moorman, 1994), overarching questions introduced at the start of instruction can support a learning continuum to balance teaching concepts and skills throughout the study.

“We must become greater advocates for our profession, even as issues of increased accountability, uses of technology, and attention to global issues revolve around us.”
For the second decision, teachers must acknowledge that they cannot teach nor infuse content across the curriculum that they do not recall or understand (Howard, 2006). Elementary pre-service teachers, in particular, must grasp social science content to support effective content integration. In a survey given to pre-service teachers during the first class of each semester, however, respondents overwhelmingly stated that initial readiness for teaching social studies content was only at or slightly below average. To address this issue, class lectures and assignments were redesigned to incorporate elements of Lee Shulman’s (2004) Model of Pedagogical Reasoning. This included reviewing comprehension strategies, demonstrating critical interpretation of text, and using culturally relevant analogies and metaphors to engage students with the content. More class time was allotted for resource-based, cooperative learning rather than lectures, to build content knowledge and create databases for future use. Technology aided this process through the use of class listservs, discussion groups, and e-publication of selected assignment materials.

For the third element --- assessment --- the completion of a grade level unit remains an anchor of the course. Unlike some course syllabi that relegate this assignment to the last days of the semester, unit discussion, planning, and teaching begin on the first day of class. Students view a media presentation of the previous semester’s ‘unit fair’ in which pre-service students presented their work, similar to a science fair, with visuals and demonstration, to explain their unit concepts and activities. Although critics frown that many of today’s textbook series and electronic-based lesson resources make the creation of a unit an obsolete assignment, unit work integrated into the entire semester’s instruction allows students to synthesize the course elements, demonstrate proficiency, and receive critical feedback to start the semester with clear outcomes identified.

On a formative level, teacher-created rubrics measure students’ proficiency on some written and oral assignments, in part to model assessment tools that many will use in their future lesson design. Reflective feedback is also encouraged, with the use of on-line journal entries, informal class feedback forms and discussions. Guided by a differentiated instruction model (Tomlinson, 1999), a key lesson objective in every class is to ask holistic questions to encourage conceptual thinking.

Whatever the final decisions in planning, teaching content or assessment, one criterion guides the thinking; course sustainability, i.e. how will this planning decision stand the test of time given different learning standards, changing educational policies, and the diverse interests of the students and school community.

As a result of the changes in course structure and emphasis, a majority of students has identified that they ‘learned a great deal in the course’ on their final course evaluations and were more ready to teach social studies content at the end of the semester than at the start. Many, however, still thought that their knowledge base in economics and geography was not sufficient to teach key concepts. They also admitted that they will initially cover what is required (by standards or administrative directives) in all subjects and plan to gather resources during their first year in the classroom.

“A critical examination of what we have done in the past, and what we will do in the future, requires that we view our profession and our contributions through new perspectives today.”
Moving Forward for
Better Teaching and Learning

S.G. Grant (2007) challenges teachers to distinguish between ‘defensive vs. ambitious teaching,’ i.e. not allowing the dictates of a mandated curriculum to confine our implementation of theory and practice, but rather to learn to deconstruct --- and rebuild --- a relevant social studies course framework in a high-stakes testing climate. In the end, a methods course should equip prospective elementary teachers with the needed knowledge, skills, and values to support their students’ future success.

Though a study of ‘self in teaching,’ I have changed how I teach in light of increasing demands, using feedback from various assessment measures and from my colleagues (Baird, 2004). More content focused than in my early teaching years, my pedagogy spans a broader and deeper range of subject elements in all social science disciplines. As a result, my search for new methods and tools continues as I try to remain true to the purposes and the power of effective social studies instruction. In effect, teaching in this era requires more than ever that I model the inquiring, fluid thought and pedagogy that I expect students to maintain in their own praxis.

Even so, other areas are works-in-progress. My purposeful and consistent technology use improves each semester; students are some of the best teachers (of each other and the instructor). Likewise, instructional decisions about the depth and breadth of each content area continue. Finally, students’ engagement in discussions and activities on cultural diversity and global issues fluctuates. I continue to examine new strategies each semester to get at the heart of their responses to promote greater understanding and class participation to prepare them for the challenges they will face.

We cannot ignore the environment in which we teach and must be more open about the tensions and contradictions that we face as teacher educators, among ourselves and sometimes with our students. A critical examination of what we have done in the past, and what we will do in the future, requires that we view our profession and our contributions through new perspectives today.

In theory, the elementary social studies methods course is designed to teach pre-service teachers fundamental social studies concepts, content and critical thinking skills. In practice, however, it is much more. By reflecting on my own practice, and engaging with others who do likewise, we can, in Susan Adler’s (1993) words, “contribute to the accumulation of knowledge about the social studies methods class” (p.41) and improve our own teaching. We must become greater advocates for our profession, even as issues of increased accountability, uses of technology, and attention to global issues revolve around us. This will lead to greater teacher empowerment and professional identity, as well as our personal success.

References


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