Teaching for Democratic Citizenship: Arriving at a Guiding Question for Pedagogical Practice

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Social studies teachers often feel a tension between wanting to teach for democratic citizenship and the need to cover the multiple areas of required content. This paper examines the nature of this tension, critically examines democratic citizenship as a universally understood process, and suggests a guiding question to assist social studies teachers with how to remain focused on the purpose of their field while also teaching mandated curriculum. The implications of this guiding question for classroom practice are discussed.

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Introduction

At the start of every school year, thousands of social studies teachers prepare to teach the subjects they love. When time allows for reflection, many of these teachers might ask, “How do I know I’m teaching (history, government, fill in the blank) correctly?” The teacher may feel confident as it relates to content knowledge, but be less confident regarding the most appropriate teaching strategies for the social studies course they are teaching. What follows is a simple rationale and process intended to help such social studies teachers align their teaching strategies with their social studies content.

The Problem

The field of social studies is more open to pedagogical dissonance than many other content areas (Dougan, 1985; Ross, 2006). The reasons for this are two-fold. One is the field of social studies is not as cohesive or linear as other fields such as mathematics or science (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Another reason centers on social studies teachers having a wide and changing range of content to cover. The following cartoon highlights this dissonance by illustrating a group of confused social studies teachers trying to piece together a puzzle.

In this sketch, members of the Social Science Education Consortium sit around a table with puzzle pieces used to make up the social studies. Confused as to where various pieces such as: values clarification, consumerism, ethical studies, etc. may intersect with more traditional pieces such as: factual knowledge and the social sciences, the participants admit, without some idea of what the big picture (the social studies) looks like they are not sure where to begin. As indicated here, the areas to be covered in the social studies are vast and not always immediately apparent to many social studies teachers. Even if one does not include global studies or multicultural education, the social studies still encompasses a wide variety of social science and humanities disciplines including, “anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion, and sociology, as well as appropriate content from the humanities, mathematics, and natural sciences” (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 1992, p 3). Added to this are the demands of effectively teaching English Language Learners (Cruz, Nutta, O’Brien, Feyten, & Govoni, 2003), connecting to the Common
Core Standards (NCSS, 2013), increasing high-states testing pressures (Fitchett & Heafner, 2012), and a host of other issues. As yet another piece to the social studies puzzle, social studies educators can feel overwhelmed and in need of direction. For those truly concerned with the mechanics of teaching social studies, where are they to begin?

One place to begin would be to examine various NCSS position statements on how to teach the social studies. Some of these might include: A Vision of Powerful Teaching and Learning in the Social Studies: Building Social Understanding and Civic Efficacy (NCSS, 2008); Preparing Citizens for a Global Community (NCSS, 2001); Social Studies for Early Childhood and Elementary School Children: Preparing for the 21st Century (NCSS, 1988), or Social Studies in the Middle School (NCSS, 1991). All of these are useful and provide guidance on how to teach to a particular subject or topic related to the social studies. I would suggest, however, that one begin with a clear understanding of the purpose of what we, as social studies teachers, are charged with teaching. Is there an agreed upon end that would help direct our means? I would argue there is, and, once this end is clearly identified, it may be used as the unwavering compass on how to teach the content.

**Connecting to the Purpose of the Social Studies**

The purpose of the social studies, as a whole, is to promote good citizenship in a democracy. The development of an effective citizenry through social participation and decision-making should be at the core of social studies instruction (Engle & Ochoa, 1988). This is perhaps the only area in our field in which there is a widely held consensus. In their seminal...
book, *The Nature of the Social Studies*, Robert Barr, James Barth, and Samuel Shermis (1978) described the social studies as the, “Integration of social sciences and humanities for the purpose of instruction in citizenship education”; they continue with, “we emphasize ‘citizenship,’ for social studies,” because “despite the differences in orientation, outlook, purpose, and method of teachers, [social studies] is almost universally perceived as preparation for citizenship in a democracy” (p.18). The National Council for the Social Studies (1992) clearly stated, “The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world” (p. 3). One year prior to the release of the 1992 NCSS statement, Michael Lybarger (1991) penned, “Since the birth of western civilization, education, especially instruction in what is today called history and social studies, has been expected to foster habits of good citizenship” (p. 3). This sentiment was echoed by Michael Whelen (1992):

> Since social studies emerged as a school subject early in the twentieth century, consensus about its rationale, purposes and curricular organization has been rare. In fact, the only issue generally agreed upon has been that social studies has a special responsibility for citizenship education (p. 2).

In a more recent account, Rahima Wade (2008) succinctly stated, “The primary purpose of the social studies is to prepare youth for civic competence (as cited in Levstik & Tyson, 2008, p. 110). These purposes are the glue that hold the field of social studies together, and should, in turn, dictate the manner in which the content of the social studies be delivered.

Even if one assumes widespread consensus on the promotion of democratic citizenship as the purpose of the social studies, further clarification is required. What is good citizenship in a democracy, what are its characteristics, and how is it taught? The concept of good democratic citizenship is abstract. While abstract concepts are not as easily grasped as their concrete counterparts, the social studies are replete with such concepts that need to be taught, specifically through the use of metaphors, analogies, and webbing strategies (Tennyson & Cocchiarella, 1986; Tirrell, 1984). The following activity may be used to demonstrate that most students do not readily understand the concept of good democratic citizenship.

**Generating a List of Citizenship Dispositions**

Begin by holding a class discussion on the overall accepted purpose of the social studies as the promotion of good citizenship. Then state to your class that, as an abstract concept, good citizenship can be more difficult to define than other, more concrete, concepts. Ask students to participate in a simple brainstorming activity in which they respond to the following question: What are the characteristics of a good citizen? Have them complete the sentence, “A good citizen...”. Give positive reinforcement as the students respond and compose a list on the board with occasional prompts until the quickness of the responses slows.

If your class is similar to the university classes I have engaged in this activity, the list your class generates will look very similar to the following:

A good citizen:

- votes
- is patriotic
- pays taxes
- obeys the law
- contributes to society
• is educated
• helps or is kind to others
• is trustworthy
• participates in community activities

This list is remarkable for two reasons. The first is the degree to which it is predictable. Each class I have ever worked with on this activity comes up with a list of attributes, characteristics, or dispositions associated with a good citizen that is a replication (or slight variation) of the one above. This occurs so frequently, I created the above list in order to share with my classes after each has exhausted their ideas on this concept. In comparing and contrasting the two lists, the resemblance is somewhat eerie to the students.

The second reason for the characteristics or dispositions on the list is more troubling. Few, if any, of the characteristics or dispositions included in the student-generated list for good citizens actually contains anything that is unique to or explicitly geared toward a democracy. I ask the students which of the given characteristics would leaders in a non-democratic society not want? If your students should question the characteristic of voting as a desired citizenship trait for many non-democratic nations, one can point to the voter turnout of countries such as Cuba, or North Korea. These were 99% in 1993, and 99.9% in 2003, respectively (Reuters, 2003). These statistics can support the argument that voting is expected there as well (International IDEA, 2014; Reuters, 2003).

One may concede to the students at this point that, when you asked the original question (what are some characteristics of a good citizen?), you omitted the word democratic. Yet, it is not as if they did not understand the question the first time. No one assumed you were asking for traits of good citizenship for a generic universal citizen or for a good citizen in the People’s Republic of China. Be sure to clarify that the responses they have given so far are not wrong. You too want citizens in the United States to obey the law and vote. The point is that the list they generated is incomplete, and, one could argue, woefully so.

Reframe, then, the question asking, “What traits, characteristics or dispositions are critical for a good citizen to have who lives in a democracy?” Probe the students to now include any characteristics that might be needed specifically for democratic citizens. In other words, what dispositions or skills are critical for a democratic citizenry that are not critical for a non-democratic citizenry? Once questions are posited in this manner, the received responses are usually more thoughtful and might include such attributes as:

• thinks critically
• is able to compromise
• thinks independently
• is open-minded
• makes decisions
• is able to collect and analyze data
• is able to work with others to solve problems
• promotes democratic principles
• appreciates differences
• communicates effectively
• is prone to question a given position
The disposition to question is one requiring particular attention, since it is a prerequisite for many of the other traits. To question is a necessary condition for any real inquiry. Without the disposition to question, there is no real problem to consider, and one is not likely to work through the steps of hypothesizing, collecting data, and analyzing data, to reach testable conclusions. Without the need to solve problems, the need to think critically is not as important. If one is not open-minded, then new information that may be relevant to the problem is often not considered fully or is even dismissed out of hand. The appreciation of differences and the considering of multiple perspectives provide alternative views for solutions that would not be arrived at otherwise. Communication skills are critical not only in the process of working together to solve problems or resolve issues, but also to help convince others who, in a democracy, have as valid a perspective as anyone else regarding the topic of investigation.

**Working Toward a Guiding Question for Pedagogical Practice**

How does this activity begin to drive how a social studies teacher teaches? There are two sets of skills or dispositions associated with citizenship education. The qualities contained in the original student-generated list are easily recalled and articulated. The second set of skills and dispositions may be known, but does not come to mind as readily. The first list is not incorrect, it is just not unique to societies hoping to produce an active, democratically-minded citizenry. The first list is more quickly retrieved and in the forefront of most students, teachers, and community members’ minds. So, it follows that our schools do a better job stressing the importance of these traits, both in the explicit and hidden curriculum (Apple, 1971). The skills and dispositions contained in the second list are arguably, even more valuable for citizens in a democracy as the social studies remains the primary area responsible for developing these skills and dispositions.

The case for both socialization and counter-socialization in producing democratic citizens is made in *Education for democratic citizenship: Decision making in the social studies* (Engle & Ochoa, 1988). They argued this process should occur gradually over time with more counter socialization occurring in the later school years than the initial school years, but should occur to some degree at all levels. The same could be said of the two sets of democratic citizenship traits. Schools do a commendable job of promoting responsibility, following rules, being patriotic, etc. Schools are less active in outwardly developing the second set of critical traits.

Given the argument above, I would recommend the use of one overarching question to guide the pedagogical strategies of any social studies teacher throughout her or his entire career. The question is simple, but to provide the most useful progression of thought on the implications for social studies teachers, I will restate it here three different ways. Most directly one could ask, “Am I teaching in a manner that is consistent with the purpose of the social studies?” This question, restated more specifically, could resemble the following: “Am I teaching in a manner that promotes vital democratic citizenship traits, skills, and dispositions?” The final question could be, “Am I teaching in a manner that requires (even demands) my students to:

- question provided information;
- think critically;
- collect and analyze data;
- make decisions;
- solve problems;
- think independently while working cooperatively with others;
communicate their position with peers;
• maintain an open mind;
• appreciate differences; and,
• solve problems?”

If one considers the components of the final question, the pedagogical implications become more apparent. The use of inquiry as a teaching strategy becomes viewed as an increasingly relevant and appealing means to have students investigate content. It is through this process, students are given information to engage in cognitive dissonance relative to important social studies (or social science) issues. It is in this environment, they are asked to formulate hypotheses, to collect and analyze data, and to test these conclusions. Questioning becomes a valued attribute students must display in the social studies classroom. Activities requiring students to question all sources of information: e.g., the text, the teacher, the policies, etc., all contribute to a classroom atmosphere in which, over time, a respectful skepticism becomes the norm. As this evolutionary process of learning takes place, supplemental pedagogies take on another level of relevancy because they connect directly to the purpose developing desired and necessary skills and dispositions needed by a democratically engaged citizenry.

Conclusion

In the opening paragraph, I stated many social studies teachers, when given the time to reflect, might question whether the particular strategies they are using are the most appropriate for teaching their content area. Given the amorphous nature of the social studies, it is necessary to remain focused on the over-arching purpose of the field, which is enhancing citizenship education in a democracy. The purpose cannot be properly addressed unless the teacher has a clear vision of just what skills and dispositions are needed to foster democratic citizenship. This is further complicated because such a vision is not readily shared (Barr, Barth, & Shermis, 1978). As long as the social studies remains the primary area charged with this purpose social studies teachers must provide instruction through the use of strategies that require their students to focus, to engage, and to develop the very skills and dispositions necessary for democratic citizenship. The guiding question developed above will assist teachers in aligning the best pedagogical strategies with the given content they are charged with teaching.

References


### Web-based References


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