

# Debating the Meaning of “Social Studies”

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“Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.” -- John Dewey

*After briefly reviewing relevant public schooling history and how it has contextualized the development of social studies, heated debates are described. Two main perspectives are portrayed: the progressive developers’ views and those of their critics. The paper concludes with an attempt to bridge this seemingly insurmountable ideological divide.*

## INTRODUCTION

Social studies is a fairly new course. Born in a 1916 American Report, social studies has been conceptualized and taught in a variety of ways. Wide understandings of this new subject have resulted in difficult and often bitter debates throughout the twentieth century. These include discussions over: (a) what curricular content should be taught; (b) what values, particularly in the areas of diversity or citizenship, should inform the curriculum; and (c) what perspective of culture, assimilationist, relativist, or inclusionary, is most important to emphasize in the content provided (Sears and Wright, 2004).

In the United States in particular, heated discussions in academia are currently occurring over the meaning, content, and purpose of the subject. This paper will explore the two major perspectives after reviewing the development of mass schooling and of the subject itself. This contextualizing description is necessary for a proper understanding of the two main perspectives of the subject. After describing the two major sides, this paper will pursue similar, although less acrid, debates occurring in Canada. It will conclude with an attempt to bridge the divides that are undermining the subject through an alternative perspective that is rooted in the strengths of both viewpoints. The aim is to clarify current understandings of social studies and to advance an acceptable alternative, based on a holistic understanding of education.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF PUBLIC SCHOOLING AND SOCIAL STUDIES

Mass public schooling is a common feature of life today in Canada, but it is a fairly new invention, a product of the industrial age. Prior to the nineteenth century, education was a private and class-based affair. Parents educated their young, and children often worked alongside their parents in completing daily chores. Some parents apprenticed their children to a trade. Only the wealthy upper class could afford tutors or private schools, which provided their sons and daughters with a “liberal education,” an academic curriculum aimed at improving the whole person. Aside from small church schools, which provided instruction in reading primarily to expand faith and morality, schooling was a privilege few could afford (Boyd and King, 1975).

At the end of the eighteenth century, Germany led a transformation of education by instituting public schooling. The Prussian state saw in education a way of creating loyal citizens and inculcating particular morals (Cordasco, 1976). Industrialization melded with this new conceptualization of schooling to produce the common public school for the large number of children amassed in dark, smoke-infested city grottos, who were, as the business class argued, in need of training in “proper” work values. Reformers claimed that public elementary schools were the new panacea for society’s ills (Osborne, 1985). Schools would produce the docile, trained workers so desperately needed for the labour-hungry industries. Public education would also form morally upright citizens. Lastly, in the words of an 1898 *Teacher’s Guide—Programme of Course Study for Public Schools*, public education would prepare students “for the ordinary employments and duties of life” (Malaspina).

In being both a product and an aim of the industrial age, these schools mirrored their times. They provided a “basic,” or “common,” education for elementary students in reading, writing, and arithmetic – basic skills reformers hoped would create a “better” society (Tompkins, 1985 and 1986). History was given an important role in building good citizens; it was to tell students the grand narrative of the state, with the aim of fuelling national pride and forging a common identity. Most importantly, school structures reinforced the work values which middle class reformers advocated: bells announced when students were to sit down and pay attention and when to rest; school rules enforced an industrial work ethic, such as arriving on time and completing work as required, supplemented by corporal punishment for those who dared to assert their independence. Pedagogy centred on pushing students to learn content, which was believed to build the mind. However, these common schools trained workers not leaders. The nation’s future leaders, the sons of the aristocracy, were to be educated in fancy private schools, which also grew in numbers and popularity through out the nineteenth century (Boyd and King, 1975; Barman, 1984).

By the early twentieth century, a number of reformers advocated change in schools. They were influenced by several theories, including social efficiency, which aimed to rationalize schooling practices, developments in child psychology and progressivism (Evans, 2004; Symcox, 2002; Kliebard, 1998, 2002). All reformers pressed for the expansion of accessibility to more pupils and longer attendance at public schools. They argued that education could be used to improve society, to train good citizens, and to prepare individuals for their appropriate places in society. With the power to enact their ideals, child labour laws and compulsory attendance laws were codified. Combining with other factors, including an increased belief in the value of education for advancing life opportunities (Barman, 1988), attendance increased. The growing presence of groups from all classes and many ethnicities led to further calls for reform. One American philosopher, Dewey, instituted a new movement aimed at enhancing the public schooling experience for students. Unimpressed by the industrial model, his followers tried to humanize schooling by linking it to real experiences and society. This movement has since been labelled “progressivism.” Dewey’s (1916) work was at its theoretical core. These ideas coalesced with those of civic-minded reformers aiming to form good citizens, as well as the social efficiency advocates, with the overall result being the creation of the new course of social studies (Whelan, 1997 and 1991; *The Social Studies*, 1994).

Developed by American professors and administrators who were mostly affiliated with Teachers’ College, social studies was born and further shaped through committees and reports. As articulated in the 1916 NEA report, social studies was to be conducted primarily through history, geography and civics: “The social studies are understood to be those whose subject matter relates directly to the organization and development of human society, and to man as a member of social groups” (*The Social Studies*, 1994, p. 17). Further, “the social studies... should have for their conscious and constant purpose the cultivation of good citizenship” (*The Social Studies*, 1994, p. 17). This report defined the parameters of the new course, and its chairperson, Thomas Jesse Jones, is credited with naming it “social studies,” from an earlier curriculum he had developed (Watkins, 1995-6). Thus, the debate over the subject was born with the emergence of the course itself.

## THE PROGRESSIVE VIEW OF SOCIAL STUDIES

A large and multifarious group, the progressivists advocate one of the major viewpoints on the subject—that schooling had to be relevant to the majority of students (Dewey, 1916). Dry facts removed from life had to be dusted away. Learning was to be reinvigorated by being linked to real life; it was to be useful and practical. Social studies was to be a new and key subject. This approach transformed history into “new history,” focused on an expanded view that used the past to help students understand their world (Whelan, 1991; Barnes, 1925). This “new history” included the new social sciences, particularly sociology, political science, and economics, and fused them together into an interdisciplinary course with a history core. It continued a tradition of making good citizens through a relevant curriculum, but these were to be Deweyan citizens, citizens who actively worked to make America a great democracy. In grade 12, for example, students were to study problems in American society in order to understand and transform their world through critical thinking. Rugg’s textbooks were a classic example of this problem-based methodology (Mraz, 2004; Rugg, 1931). In these popular books, issues such as laissez faire capitalism and racism were to be explored and improved upon through enlightening discussion.

Throughout the twentieth century, supporters of this position argued for a child centred, experiential approach to teaching. The focus was primarily on a pedagogy based in investigating problems in society, with the goal of teaching students how to think critically in order to advance democratic values. These supporters have often advocated a multidisciplinary and integrated approach to social studies teaching which includes the social sciences as well as history and geography. The importance they ascribe to educating for good citizenship in a democracy had led them to focus on the equality and educational potential of all students and, therefore, to promote inclusive programs, gender equity, and multiculturalism (Fleury, 2005; Kornfeld, 2005; Waltzer and Heilman, 2005).

Within Canada, a study of British Columbian textbooks illustrates that a similar view of social studies has been adopted in this province.<sup>1</sup> Current BC textbooks are very much social studies texts; they focus on history seen as relevant to understanding the present, on issues, on problem solving, and on a much expanded inclusion of social sciences including new geography, political science, and law content. Textbooks at the turn of the century focused on history learned as a factual narrative of the creation of Canada. Their content also aimed to create loyal citizens. These earlier textbooks point to those who support another conceptualization of social studies, those who argue for a discipline-based, traditional history, such as Saxe (2003) and Ratvich.

## THE CRITICS

A highly polemical and strongly worded report compiled by the Fordham Foundation, *Where did Social Studies Go Wrong* (Leming et. al., 2003), provides a clear example of the views of the opposing camp.<sup>2</sup> Putting aside the inflammatory language and argumentative flaws – such as stating that these critics don’t indoctrinate when they clearly have a patriotic agenda, that high schools students are not intelligent or “developed” enough to understand critical issues, and that a lesson based on progressive pedagogy may neglect content – the report does contain some good points which illustrate another perspective to the one discussed above. The authors present themselves as conservative social studies supporters whose foundations lie in “leftist” progressivism, and yet their perspective is also rooted in the industrial age school.

These critics argue that since the 1916 report, a key aim of social studies has always been the creation of good citizens. Social studies content, accordingly, should focus on teaching patriotism and not on problems and issues in society. Patriotism—having a sense of pride and a common identity—is necessary for a unified

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<sup>1</sup> Broom, C. (2006).

<sup>2</sup> The Fordham Foundation is a conservative organization, which supports choice, standards, accountability, back to basics, and content-rich, teacher-led lessons. It argues that schools are largely failing and adopts a discipline-based approach to core subjects, thus supporting history over social studies. Like the Fraser Institute in BC, it conducts testing of schools and issues reports on school performance.

citizenry. Dwelling on problems and issues divides society. It leads students to view government with scepticism, and consequently, to decreased involvement and interest in public life. As in the nineteenth century, national identity is to be taught as a “back-to-basics,” discipline-based history. Indeed, some go so far as to argue that history should supplant social studies itself. Their conceptualization of history, as in the nineteenth century view, is primarily based on political events.

In a related manner, Ellington and Eaton argue in *Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong?* that teaching “cultural relativism” by focusing on multiculturalism and the description of a number of cultures around the world, divides society by creating ethnic enclaves rather than fostering a common national sense. They find fault with global or peace studies for being “bland” and inaccurate, and for focusing on the positive features of other societies and on the negative features of American society. Rather, they assert, schooling should include grand nation-building, heart warming, history-based stories that foster a shared identity. These should work toward forging a common culture and a common set of values that assimilate individuals to one particular set of “American” values, as nineteenth schools attempted to do. The aim here is socialization not liberalization.

Further, high school students are portrayed as lacking the intellectual maturity to grasp complex debates on national issues. The authors argue that lessons should be teacher-centred and not progressive-focused on the students’ interests. These lessons should also be content based, and students’ learning should be assessed through testing. The latter is given a vital role in bringing “accountability” into the school, to ensure that students have correctly learned their lessons—just as nineteenth schools used discipline and exams to coerce student “products” of learning. Also, teachers should direct lessons through lectures. Child centred pedagogy, based in experiential learning, is seen to result in vacuous lessons without content and substance. To some extent, this view is held today in Canada.

## DEBATE IN CANADA

Much debate and interest in history has erupted in Canada recently due to concerns about citizenship and national identity (Osborne, 2003). One group argues that well told historical stories are particularly powerful in creating a common consciousness, using a similar approach that used by conservatives in the United States. For example, Granatstein states that history should be used to create a common “Canadian” identity. He attacks child centred learning and “skills mania” (Bennett, 1999). Bliss (2002), illustrating this view, wrote:

...there is a certain content relating to the history of the Canadian nation of Canadian people or Canadian peoples that ought to be taught...If we are to have a country, Canada, if we are to teach something that’s called Canadian history, our content has to be the public events of our common history, as well as some of the varieties of the private events. It is not being super-nationalistic or excessively patriotic to suggest that our sense of ourselves, especially our sense of where we have come from, is fundamental to our civic sense.

Others, such as Seixas (2002) and Osborne (1985), while also supporters of a history-centred approach, are more liberal-minded. They maintain that history should not be used to indoctrinate students through constructed “myths” with the aim of creating a common identity.<sup>3</sup> Rather, history should be used to teach students “historical consciousness,” a critical awareness of history: “students need guided opportunities to confront conflicting accounts, various meanings, and multiple interpretations of the past, because these are exactly what they will encounter outside of school, and they need to learn to deal with them” (Seixas, 2002). In the words of Osborne (1985):

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<sup>3</sup> Osborne (2000) describes his belief in a decline in school history teaching and attributes it to: “...history...under increasing pressure from the advocates of interdisciplinary social studies, from the vocationalists, from the preachers of relevance, from the skills enthusiasts, from all those who valued so-called process over product” (p. 18).

Indeed, the holders of power, past and present, have well understood the potential of history. They have used it and still use it to justify and glorify their position. History constantly runs the risk of being turned into propaganda... J. J. Plumb's (1973) distinction between *the past* and *history* is worth noting. He argues that the past is what man has used to justify and rationalize the present, whereas history tries to "see things as they really were" and thus "the critical historical process has helped to weaken the past, for by its very nature it dissolves those simple, structural generalizations by which our forefathers interpreted the purpose of life." Thus, history should not be propaganda, but counter-propaganda. (p. 54)

## A BRIDGE

Clearly the two main perspectives on social studies presented here are polarized, and other social studies theorists and practitioners will be found in a variety of places along a continuum between them. Is it possible to bridge these perspectives by adopting a more holistic perspective of education? First, we need to acknowledge that both sides have good points worth considering. The first step in bridging the divide is to recognize, inflammatory language and agendas aside, the valuable aspects of each point of view. The second is to blend these together into a sensible course. The original founders' flexible, open definitions and curriculum have left us the means to do this.

How can we achieve consensus? The first key issue to address is that of citizenship. Social studies does have a role to play in teaching citizenship. Teaching narratives of the past does develop a common identity. However, there is no need for this identity to be a narrow one. Teaching the stories of all our citizens blended together in large and expansive—and thus more real and truthful—accounts of the past which celebrate the triumphs and struggles of all groups, can cultivate a more expansive and common identity, in which all feel part of the society in which they live. Telling the stories of only a few groups in society is a distortion of history and does nothing to create sensitive and aware citizens. It alienates most youth and bores the rest to the point of alienation (Osborne, 2003). Teaching many accounts and issues will develop students' critical awareness; teaching one "master narrative" is power-based exclusion (McMaster).

Secondly, we need to realize the intelligence of our high school students. Teaching them issues is not going to turn them off. The truth is quite the opposite, as anyone who has spent many years in a high school classroom will know.<sup>4</sup> Students are often not only able to understand complex issues but are also able to consider various angles and adopt a passionate interest in conflicts based in humanity, as I have found in my own teaching. After all, they are dealing with complex issues in their own lives and are exposed to similar issues in the media and family discussions. Do we not want students who can consider different perspectives? Indoctrinating students to have one particular mindset underestimates their intelligence and devalues education in a democracy, which flourishes where debate is open, transparent, and vibrant. The "patriotic pride" approach (Waltzer and Heilman, 2005), if it works at all, produces unthinking robots, automatons of little use to themselves and others. It is also underpinned by a philosophy of inequality, for it aims to have students adopt a particular, and imposed, value set (Fleury, 2005). All students bring varied abilities and talents to school. These should be appreciated and valued, for diversity enriches our understandings, our society, and ourselves. Schooling should not be an industrial "factory" that "produces" student "outputs," as it was designed and conceptualized to be in the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, conservatives then and now have had a tendency to equate business approaches to a very different form of endeavour.

Thirdly, believing that content cannot be well taught by both a teacher centred approach and a student centred approach is false. Both can be effective. A child centred approach is a pedagogical strategy, which works well for engaging students in lessons and in content; it is not the content. Acquiring content is necessary for students to engage in critical thinking. At the same time, cramming content into students for the purpose of having them mechanically repeat it on standardized tests does nothing to develop intelligence.

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<sup>4</sup> The Fordham Report writers use "research" to back up their claims. However, we must be cautious of "research," which can often present inaccurate results, depending on how many participants and who participates, how data is collected, and how it is interpreted. One of the best ways of collecting "research" is to teach for many years, for insight into the profession comes from practicing the craft.

It also fails to consider the transitory and constructed nature of our understanding of most social studies content. In effect, the critical learning of content and the use of child centred pedagogies can occur together. Good teaching is the spice of learning.

How can we resolve the question over the inclusion of the social sciences? Well, as the 1916 report stated, history is the core of social studies, but it is an expanded history, which includes naturally within it the social sciences:

The courses in community civics and in history...are rich in their economic, sociological, and political connotations. Even if no provision be made in the last year for the further development of the special social sciences, the committee believes [new curricula]...still provide as never before for the education of the pupil regarding the economic and social relations of life. (The Social Studies, 1994, p. 58)

A wider and more holistic perspective can enrich our understanding. It is simplistic to assume, for example, that we can even understand political events, if we do not consider their economic, social, and ideological elements.

## CONCLUSION

Dewey attempted to bridge the gaps articulated in this paper by presenting a holistic philosophy of education. Unfortunately, individuals with agendas often twisted his words to support their particular aims. Dewey was correct in understanding that education is a holistic process: a blend of both hands on activities and content—both necessary—for learning to occur. Orr (1990) describes the failures—“the careerist, the ‘itinerant professional vandal’...the yuppie, the narrow specialist, the intellectual snob” (p. 207)—graduating from our schools as an “indictment of enormous gravity” (p. 208). They are the products of a dissected and rationalized curriculum and schooling: “contemporary curriculum continues to divide reality into a cacophony of subjects that are seldom integrated into a coherent pattern. There is, as Whitehead reminds us, only one subject for education, and that is ‘life in all its manifestations’”(p. 208). Orr’s solution, like Dewey’s, lies in reconceptualizing education as an integrated and holistic process, grounded in the ecological environment of one’s place. This education provides the potential for the creation of individuals with open minds who will be able to “make themselves relevant to the crisis of our age, which in its various manifestations is about the care, nurturing, and enhancement of life” (Orr, 1990, p. 216).

This holistic approach to education can aid in bridging the social studies debates. It has been the frame of reference guiding this paper, which has attempted to bring a clearer understanding and a strengthened conception of “social studies.”

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