

SOCIAL STUDIES FOR THE AUGHTIES: A LOOK BACK AND A LOOK AHEAD

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The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language provides three variations for naming the decade that has ushered in the new millennium.

The first is clear enough but somewhat bland – cipher. Using it in the title for this article, "Social Studies for the Ciphers," somehow just didn't do anything for me and probably would not appeal to *Online Academic Journal* readers either. The second listing, naught, was acceptable until put in context for this piece. "Social Studies for the Naughties" might be misleading and give the wrong impression. Aught or ought, same word, two slightly different spellings, seemed the best choice. It was specific and had a motivating spin to it based on its other meaning as a verb, ought, motivated to take action, – Social Studies for the Aughties. A new decade for a new millennium. A time for social studies educators to seize the moment, the decade, really be forceful, take center stage. Thus my choice and the title for this article. Social Studies for the Aughties – social studies for the new decade; social studies for people who have an obligation or duty and are motivated to do something about it. To paraphrase the line from the title song from the movie *Flashdance*, "social studies educators – "people who are willing to take their passion and make it happen."

In planning for the years ahead, it is helpful to look back. Back a couple of decades to 1970, a significant year in social studies education. It marked the founding of the Social Studies Supervisors Association; the landmark largest international meeting in the field ever held (until that time) sponsored by the National Council for the Social Studies in New York; as well as the first in a series of regional conferences on the social studies held in Boston.

In an article I wrote in June 1970 for an international journal, *Education World*, I quoted a story that had recently appeared in the *Boston Globe*:

“There's a not-so-quiet revolution breaking out in greater-Boston suburban schools. At the center of it are the 'now' people of the classroom, the teachers of the 'new social studies.' They're the history, humanities, people oriented educators who are wrenching schools out of the Sputnik-era syndrome of the 1950s when education rushed into a hasty marriage with the physical sciences as the nation moved to catch up in the space age. They're dragging students, and even some parents, up to the mirror of 20th century life; forcing recognition of the human meaning of our rapidly changing technological culture.”

I used the *Boston Globe* article to illustrate the greater role social studies could play in the general education of all students. I suggested that social studies in the seventies would have much to offer individuals in helping them understand the world around them and develop strategies for coping with the problems of the modern-day world.

Think about what was going on in the United States, in Southeast Asia, and around the world in 1970. Think about the challenges facing citizens and the concomitant demands on citizenship education and social studies education. In my *Education World* piece I talked about what was happening in social studies education and issued some challenges for the profession. Consider what was happening

inside and outside the school in the seventies. Determine which goals I posed were fulfilled and which perhaps have had a lasting impact on the profession. Which still may be challenges for social studies in the aughties?

First, I suggested that social studies programs in the seventies should "provide for the needs and interests of a great range of pupils of different abilities, cognitive styles, interests, and backgrounds." The curriculum being developed, I felt, should "make provisions for individual differences among the entire student population."

Were we successful in achieving that goal for the seventies? Has the nature of the student body with which we are working changed? What are some of the issues surrounding the needs of students we face today?

My second premise was that social studies in the seventies should "take into account changes in the world scene; changes in which new countries and areas have become of great international significance, in which new ideological conflicts and new social, economic, and political upheavals are revolutionizing the world." Interdependence was a key concept for the seventies. I must confess I underestimated those changes. Did you? I called for a more broadly global perspective and said that "when Neil Armstrong stepped on the moon's surface last July 20th and looked back at the Earth, Chelmsford (the community in which I lived and worked at the time), Massachusetts, New England, and even the United States appeared quite insignificant on the world scene."

To what extent were social studies in the seventies or, for that matter, are social studies in the nineties, successful in developing that global perspective and introducing students to the ideas, ideals, and peoples of the world? What challenge does this pose for the aughties? Perhaps folks like Trent Lott and Jesse Helms should be put in the Space Shuttle Discovery to take a look back at our planet.

There were two other major premises in that piece that was published in June 1970. "Social studies in the seventies," I said, should "emphasize thinking processes needed by citizens. In a democracy the goal must be a thinking citizen, not a person who accepts ready made ideas without critical examination. High priority will be given to the goal of developing the ability to inquire. Inquiry as a teaching strategy will be more likely than other strategies to motivate interest in the social studies, develop meaningful learning of concepts and generalizations, and teach the thinking processes needed in gaining knowledge."

In 1970 I, along with countless others, was perhaps hung up on inquiry as a process. We drew upon the work of Ted Fenton at Carnegie-Mellon University and Hilda Taba at San Francisco State to help students develop analytical skills and to do something with the knowledge they were forced to learn and then recall. The Fenton and Taba curricular materials became prototypes. Where are these materials today? Imbedded in resources being used for what we call authentic instruction? Not much use of the term inquiry, per se, however.

The more fundamental goal implied in this third premise is education for citizenship. Citizenship education is a compass point by which many social studies educators today set their instruction. Education for citizenship is the foundation for the National Council for the Social Studies definition of the field and the Council's widely accepted set of curriculum standards.

Finally, I suggested that the "current media revolution" should have an effect on social studies in the seventies. "The traditional textbook of the past," I hypothesized, "will be replaced by a systems approach in the use of media. Films, film loops, filmstrips, audiotapes, instructional television, study prints, trade books, primary and secondary source readings, transparencies, and artifacts will be selectively employed to develop objectives and to take care of the range of interests, and abilities, and learning styles that are found in every class."

For the seventies I was pretty much on target relating to media. Thanks mainly to countless curriculum projects funded by the National Science Foundation, other public and private institutions, and major publishers, the seventies was the era of the "new" social studies. A trip through the exhibit area of any of the National Council for the Social Studies conferences of the seventies would have borne this out. In basic U. S. history programs alone there were choices, not echoes. For example in American history one could select a book, "*Discovering American History*," that was nothing but a collection of primary source materials, or "A New History of the United States" that had a combination of source materials and historical essays along with a kit of materials including, a first, overhead transparencies for the teacher. Another text was totally thematic, "*A People and A Nation*." Its first chapter was a contemporary look at America. For those who preferred a "one damn thing after another" approach, the popular text by Todd and Curti would be the choice. "*Study America*," provided a kit of paperback books that used an integrated interdisciplinary American literature-American history instructional plan. Or one might prefer a text published during the bicentennial called "*America! America*." It became the largest seller because it was a combination of the best of what was being thought and taught at the time. There were lots of choices and a variety of media. More than a dozen of the so called major publishers who exhibited at social studies conferences in the seventies are no longer in business or a part of the handful of major publishers that remain today. My so called media revolution of a quarter of a century ago pales by comparison today. It's reasonable however to say that the seventies were a turning point.

Well, how did we do in meeting those goals: diversity in programs and approaches to meet the needs of students in social studies classes, content with a global and interdependent focus, citizenship education through inquiry, and a media revolution in the classroom?

I must confess I made somewhat similar hypotheses in a chapter I was asked to write for the National Education Association's book, "*Education in the Eighties: Social Studies*." There was some variation in the themes but suffice it to say the eighties were not a decade of radical change for social studies curriculum and instruction. New curriculum development at a national level was almost nonexistent. It was more a settling down period highlighted by the elimination of major curriculum funds by the federal government and private agencies and the consolidation of major publishers producing social studies textbooks and related materials. This continued into the nineties but with some changes that set the stage for Social Studies in the Aughties.

2006 is an exciting time for education in general and social studies education in particular. The president of the United States continues to make education one of centerpieces of his administration. The challenges of the twenty-first century seem to be motivating the Bush administration to encourage state departments of education and local school districts to assure that "No child is left behind."

The U. S. Department of Defense Dependents Schools around the world, the District of Columbia, the five U. S. territories, and every state in the union with the exception of Nevada have set or are engaged in setting curriculum standards for their teachers and students. They have based their benchmarks on the social studies curriculum standards of the National Council for the Social Studies. They are also developing assessment practices to evaluate the impact of these new standards.

Never in the history of this world have there ever been so many proposed standards for social studies, history, geography, economics, and civic education. The bad news is there is a lot to choose from. The good news is that there is a lot to choose from. When the dust settles in the aughties and the broad consensus-building debate ends, social studies education in American schools will be world class. It will reflect the best scholarship within the disciplines. The current debate will produce a balanced rigorous curriculum composed of the most important concepts from the fields from which social studies draws. This new curriculum will be developmentally appropriate and challenging but attainable with

sustained effort by all students. The standards will drive professional development, curriculum development, instructional strategies, and assessment practices.

What great challenges but what important opportunities for social studies in the aughties. A little overwhelming perhaps, considering the fact that approximately two thirds of social studies educators are over 40 years of age (actually 69% in New Hampshire). (The biggest challenge may be to produce enough *Geritol* to keep us all going.) A reasonable first assumption for the first decade of the new millennium: social studies in the aughties will be based on a rigorous set of performance standards, national in their orientation, but developed and assessed in each of the states, and personalized when implemented at the local level.

These standards will engage students actively in their own learning. They will be forced to solve complex problems by making meaning through real-world applications and real-world experience. The success of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics standards in dramatically improving student achievement on the National Assessment of Educational Performance (NAEP) tests by continuously having students "do" math, not just "learn" math, will serve as an example. Students will not only "learn" social studies. They will "do" social studies.

Socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, or gender will not obstruct the process. Neither will a student's preferred learning style or dominant intelligence for making meaning. Call it authentic pedagogy as social studies guru Fred Newman and others do or constructivism, students will be forced to demonstrate their understanding of concepts and generalizations from the social studies in a variety of practical experiences. They will incorporate their analytical skills by using them to interpret and explain problems within their schools or communities and in our nation as well as the broad social, economic, and ecological issues facing humankind around the globe. These real world applications will help students experience first-hand the complexities and consequences of decision-making that are such a critical part of education for citizenship- the goal of social studies education. Citizenship in a democratic society is not a spectator sport. Neither should citizenship education. The work of the Constitutional Rights Foundation with St. Mary's College and countless school districts in the Los Angeles area as well as here in New England the work of Howard Muscott's SO PREPARED Project at Rivier College with Bishop Guertin and Nashua, New Hampshire High Schools can serve as meaningful examples of one type of service learning, a dynamic citizenship education experience. Social studies in the aughties will engage students directly and actively in the learning process.

The media revolution will continue in the aughties and social studies will not be exempt. Great social studies teachers will take advantage of computers, DVDs, other media, and the emerging technologies that are constantly knocking on their classroom doors. They will guide students through computer simulations such as those developed by Tom Snyder Productions that force students to make decisions on critical issues or apply geographic concepts using Broderbund software as they try to find Carmen Sandiego. With their teacher's guidance students will be able to draw upon the resources of the National Digital Library Program at the Library of Congress and other collections. Through the Internet they will be able to do research and communicate with people around the world. Social studies in the aughties will exploit the media revolution.

Academically rigorous programs that engage students actively in making meaning and draw upon the computer and other emerging technologies – the aughties hold much promise for social studies education.

This great potential will be realized if social studies educators heed the lessons they can learn from two of my favorite literary characters: Jack Ryan and Zorba the Greek.

As teachers or supervisors let us not forget one of the lessons that Zorba taught Nikko in Nikos Kazantzakis' great novel, "Zorba the Greek." Here are two brief excerpts from memorable scenes. What's the message they suggest for social studies educators?

Zorba scratched his head (and said), "I've got a thick skull boss. I don't grasp things easily. Ah, if only you could dance all that you just said then I'd understand... Or, if you could tell me all that in a story, boss."

And later as Nikko and Zorba are preparing to set up a system for their new enterprise, Zorba says,

"And why the devil d'you have to go down to the sea to make calculations? Pardon me, boss, for asking this question, but I don't understand. When I have to wrestle with figures, I feel I'd like to stuff myself into a hole in the ground, so I can't see anything. If I raise my eyes and see the sea, or a tree, or a woman- even if she's an old 'un- damme if all the sums and figures don't go to blazes. They grow wings and I have to chase 'em."

Perhaps it was Kazantzakis and Zorba that influenced Howard Gardner's work in multiple intelligences or Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard's writing on situational and differential leadership. Keep Zorba's lesson in mind as you develop curriculum, teach, or supervise. Don't dumb down the standards for some kids or lower your expectations for certain faculty members. But learn a lesson from Zorba and be sensitive to the need to provide different strokes for different folks; different approaches for different teachers and students to meet rigorous standards, engage actively in the teaching and learning process, and use media effectively.

In "*A Clear and Present Danger*" author Tom Clancy has his mega character, Jack Ryan, developing a strategy for overcoming one of the countless crises that Clancy has posed for Ryan. In developing his strategic plan, Ryan confidentially advises a colleague.

"Play the game," Ryan declares. "Don't let the game play you."

Good advice for social studies educators as well. Take your passion and make it happen. Develop a plan. Let people know about the fine things you are doing. Celebrate your student successes as they achieve national and international standards; make meaning in our complex world; and engage in effective use of computers and other technologies. Anticipate contingencies. Strategize. Maintain control. Develop a good offense to anticipate attacks from the Christian Coalitions and Pioneer Institutes of this world. Play the game, damn it. Don't let the game play you.

Read the Spring 2011 issue of the *Rivier College Online Academic Journal* to check out what the aughties have wrought.

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