

No doubt most people would regard educating young people to be good citizens as a worthy goal. But such attempts often fall under the umbrella of “social studies,” which is where the problem begins. Unfortunately, students often regard the subject as boring and a waste of time. Politically engaged parents and other adults may be suspicious that it consists of either right-wing or left-wing indoctrination. College and university professors disparage social studies as a catch-all field without real substance or definition. Social studies teachers, even if they strongly believe in what they are doing, frequently express frustration at both the lack of student interest and the efforts of outsiders to force specific content and methodological agendas on their classes.

These negative reactions are unfortunate reminders that, although individual teachers may achieve success, social studies itself has yet to achieve general public and academic respect and understanding.

Purposes and Goals

Despite these challenges, spokespersons for social studies consistently and confidently assert lofty goals for their field. Nearly everyone agrees that schools at all levels should pre-

pare children and young people to become informed and effectively engaged citizens. Ronald W. Evans, professor of education at San Diego State University, speaks of “the need to prepare thoughtful, knowledgeable, clear-thinking citizens.” The Michigan State Board of Education in 1987 described the central purpose of social studies education as “the development of citizenship.” In its statement on standards, written in response to the standards debate of the 1990s, the National Council for the Social Studies stated that a major purpose of social studies programs is “the promotion of civic competence—which is the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required of students to be able to assume ‘the office of citizen’ (as Thomas Jefferson called it) in our democratic republic.”²

According to this view, social studies has a unique role to play in a democracy, for it helps citizens gain an understanding of the foundational values of the society and how to act effectively on those values. From this perspective, it is not enough for students to simply understand and ac-



U.S. Supreme Court building

EDUCATING FOR CITIZENSHIP

SOCIAL STUDIES IN CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION

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cept such “ideals as equality, equity, freedom and justice,” they must also learn “how to respect others who are different, how to cooperate with one another, and to work together for the common good.”³ Reflecting John Dewey’s view that schools were to be laboratories of democracy, the field of social studies seeks to prepare students for participation in the political process of decision making. Thus, the goal of social studies is not simply to convey academic

BY GARY LAND

knowledge, but to transform students into active and responsible citizens.⁴

A Brief History of Social Studies

Despite general agreement regarding its purposes and goals, the field of social studies has experienced continual debate over how best to implement them in the classroom, as well as whether the curriculum should support existing societal structures or create activists who will seek social

change. The foundation of the U.S. social studies curriculum was developed through a series of reports by committees of the National Education Association (1894 and 1916) and the American Historical Association (1899). Through this process, history emerged as the core subject of social studies, partly because historians formed a professional organization before the social scientists and also, particularly within the context of World War I, because teaching history was seen as an effective means of encouraging patriotism. Influenced by the recommendations of the 1916 committee and the subsequent formation of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) in 1921, the social studies curriculum that continues to dominate American education took form.

But even as this curriculum developed, critics argued that it encouraged social conformity and placed excessive emphasis on the past. Led by Harold Rugg of Teachers College, Columbia University, reformers in the 1920s began calling for the establishment of a problems-centered, rather than historical, approach to social studies and the establishment of a Problems of Democracy course to be required of all high school students. In his history of social studies, Ronald W. Evans, a strong advocate of a problems- or issues-oriented approach, points out the influ-

ence of the Protestant social gospel movement on these reformers, who “made a partial transfer of redemptive power from religious to secular institutions, developing a view of social evolution that held that people could control and improve their world by conscious means.”⁵

The problems-centered approach reached its high point in the 1930s as Rugg developed a series of textbooks, and the Great Depression forced American disciplines were becoming influential within the field. Their leaders urged that such subjects as sociology, government, and economics be taught separately. This change was furthered by the advent of the Cold War, when those calling for reform were regarded as subverting American values; as well as the general decline of the progressive education movement, which had birthed the problems-centered approach. Thus, by the late 1950s, the NCSS was recommending that social studies be organized around the separate disciplines.

The social and political turmoil of the 1960s produced yet another effort to change social studies education. An issues-centered approach, endorsed by the NCSS in 1971, once again took center stage, most significantly in the federally funded “Man: A Course of Study” (frequently referred to as “MA-

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icans to recognize the need for social and political changes. At the same time, however, the various social sci-

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COS”), developed by the Harvard Educational Development Center and introduced in the late 1960s. By the mid-1970s, various conservative political organizations, journalists, and politicians had discovered MACOS and were denouncing it as subverting American values and morality. Along with the effort to organize the social studies curriculum around issues, a new teaching methodology also emerged, focusing on inquiry. In this approach, students, rather than passively learning information from textbooks, actively formulated questions that then guided their search for answers. This methodology also disturbed critics, who believed that it failed to indoctrinate students in American traditions.

MACOS and other issues-centered programs soon disappeared, along with much of the inquiry approach; by the 1980s, a strong “back-to-basics” movement had emerged, encouraged by such entities as the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Bradley Foundation, which wanted schools to emphasize history and geography. While issues such as multiculturalism continued to cause controversy, by the beginning of the 21st century, social studies had regained much of its traditional content and methodology. In the words of critic Ronald W. Evans, “for the most part, both the content and pedagogy of the curriculum retain a constancy rooted in traditional practices. . . . Educational procedure is marked by continuity and routine, by the persistence of recitation and other traditional approaches.”⁶

Reconsidering Social Studies

In the U.S., boards of education at various levels determine whether the social studies curriculum will be organized around disciplines or social issues, but individual teachers control the day-to-day implementation of that curriculum. By keeping the goal of citizenship education foremost, teachers can avoid taking sides in the ongoing controversy, drawing on a variety of elements and approaches as they “help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public

good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world.”⁷

Reformers such as Ronald Evans have frequently described history as a subject that emphasizes rote memorization and encourages traditional rather than new ways of understanding. However, these characteristics seem to be mostly the product of teaching methods rather than inherent qualities of the discipline. Whether teaching history at the elementary, junior high school, or high school levels, the instructor can use the past to illuminate the present.

As we are reminded by the American news media nearly every day, questions of constitutional interpretation severely divide politicians and much of the public, resulting in bitter controversies over the appointment of judges to federal appeals courts and to the Supreme Court. Rather than simply requiring students to memorize the facts of *Marbury v. Madison* (1803), *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), and *Roe v. Wade* (1973), among other important cases that traditionally show up in American history courses, the teacher who seeks to educate discerning citizens will use these cases to help students understand how and why constitutional interpretation

has changed over time.

A short time ago, on a Sunday-morning news interview show, I heard a U.S. senator say that the right to abortion was now established law and therefore could not be changed. Any student whose teacher had helped him or her understand the Constitution historically could have corrected the senator, pointing out that while precedent is extremely important, it is not absolute. Even when supported by subsequent decisions, established law in one period can become disestablished in another, as attested to in the history of segregation. A student who understands such issues can thereby become an effective participant in the political process. For both the teacher and the student, facts should not be ends in themselves but rather must contribute to a more comprehensive view of how society works and has taken its present form.

“Thoughtful Patriotism”

Another important element of becoming an effective citizen is the ability to think critically and reflectively. Indeed, a popular phrase in recent years is “thoughtful patriotism.”⁸ For the past three decades or more, there has been a push for multicultural education that incorporates the viewpoints and expe-

The American Social Studies Curriculum*

Grade	Topics
K	Self, school, community, home
1	Families
2	Neighborhoods
3	Communities
4	State history, geographic regions
5	United States history
6	World cultures, Western Hemisphere
7	World geography or world history
8	United States history
9	Civics or world cultures
10	World history
11	United States history
12	American government

*Wayne Ross, “The Struggle for the Social Studies Curriculum,” in *The Social Studies Curriculum: Purposes, Problems, and Possibilities*, rev. ed., E. Wayne Ross, ed. (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2001), pp. 27, 28.

riences of both men and women, various ethnic groups and social-economic classes, and diverse cultures. By introducing multiple perspectives, the teacher can help students learn how to compare and evaluate. Elizabeth Noll, a 6th-grade teacher, describes how she moved away from “textbook-dominated teaching and teacher-dominated learning to a more learner-centered approach” that incorporates a variety of perspectives. Focusing on the country to which many members of her community trace their ancestry, she and her students developed a list of possible sources of information as varied as inter-



Emmanuel Missionary College Medical Cadet Corps present flags, 1943.

views, newspaper and magazine articles, and cookbooks. As the students searched for information, the teacher

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raised questions such as “Were there any contradictions in the information your sources provided?” and “How did the perspectives you found differ?”

As she developed this approach throughout the year, later applying it to the study of other countries, Noll found that her students gained a “broader and richer” understanding than could be provided by a textbook. “Through their varied reading experiences, discussions, learning logs, interviews, and final sharing,” she concludes in her account of this experience, “my students constructed knowledge that had personal meaning for them. This knowledge was about more than a country. It was also about themselves as capable learners.”⁹ The

abilities that these students developed as they compared and evaluated information not only increased their understanding of the world but also introduced them to critical thinking skills. If reinforced in other classes (and this is very important), these habits of mind will enable them to better respond to the myriad views that citizens

must sort through when making decisions about public issues.

Social Studies in the Adventist School

Within the Adventist school, social studies offers the opportunity to consider what it means to be a Christian citizen. At the lower elementary levels, the teacher must help students understand, for instance, what it means to be a resident of a neighborhood and the responsibilities that this entails. As the child moves into higher grade levels, local and state history become important, in part because they offer a sense of place that is often lacking in mobile societies. Through these educational experiences, students have the oppor-

tunity to reflect on how their Christian commitment might affect the way they relate to non-Adventist or non-Christian neighbors. They should come to understand that the local church is part of a web of institutions that hold the community together. Although Americans tend to emphasize the isolated individual, the Christian classroom in particular, through emphasis on the fact that all people are God’s creatures and made in His image, can help students appreciate the ways their lives are intimately connected with those around them.

Secondary-level social studies courses, whether organized around the dis-

ciplines or focused on social issues, offer the opportunity to examine issues of significance to Christians, such as how to relate to military service and war, social responsibility for the poor, environmental concerns, and ethnic relations. Although Seventh-day Adventists have long been concerned with



Case studies of people like Desmond Doss, a Seventh-day Adventist conscientious objector who won the Congressional Medal of Honor, can help students explore the tensions between loyalty to one’s country and loyalty to God.



The Christian social studies classroom can help students appreciate the fact that all people are created in God's image and are connected as neighbors in the community.

church-state relations, the emergence of such issues as abortion, gay rights, creationism, and moral instruction in the public schools have raised new questions about the role of religion in the public square. Underlying all of these debates is the fundamental question of what constitutes justice, a concept that demands sustained Christian reflection,¹⁰ including from high school-age students. The social studies classroom provides a context within which students can develop their critical thinking skills as they discover that not all Christians agree on various political and cultural issues. Having them read, for example, contrasting articles by James Dobson of *Focus on the Family* and Jim Wallis of *Sojourners* on any of a host of issues will help them understand that conservative Christians can reach different conclusions on public matters.

Implicit in the matter of learning to appreciate and understand multiple perspectives within the Christian classroom is the issue of the relationship between loyalty to one's country and loyalty to God. Students must be taught that obedience to God takes priority over allegiance to one's nation and submission to legal authorities. At the same time, they must learn that sorting out these priorities and putting them into practice is not always easy. A variety of historical situations can be used as case studies to help students determine an appropriate Adventist Christian response to the tension between patriotism, obedience to law, and religious faith. Teachers might draw on well-documented examples such as the actions of the Adventist Church in Nazi Germany,¹¹ John Henry Weidner's efforts to help Jews escape Nazi-occupied France,¹² Desmond Doss's experience as

a "conscientious cooperator" in the United States Army during World War II,¹³ and the denomination's experience with "Project Whitecoat" in the Cold War-era United States.¹⁴ Bringing in the experiences of other Christian traditions, such as the Mennonites,¹⁵ will help deepen the discussion.

Conclusion

Fundamentally, social studies aims to help children and young people understand that human beings flourish within a caring community. Being a good citizen means giving unselfishly of oneself. By understanding the various institutions that make up a community—from the neighborhood level to the international scene—and the historical developments that have produced the world we live in today, students will be prepared to become effective citizens. Society and God's kingdom depend on it. ✍



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