

HISTORY AND SOCIAL STUDIES: A QUESTION OF PHILOSOPHY

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Few educational debates have been as sustained and acrimonious as whether school curriculum should emphasize history or social studies.² In this article I argue that school history has largely shared social and individual goals with social studies, while the latter has relied on history as central to learning about the present. Although I conclude that social studies may be better than history alone at achieving the goals to which both subjects adhere, what really seems to be in dispute is two different ways of organizing the curriculum. That is, whether scholarly bodies of historical knowledge and methods or the concerns of society and youth should be the starting point for formulating programs in “social study.”

Surely all educators would agree that students need to learn about human society and interactions. Such “social study” includes, for example, issues of “family life, politics and economics, of war and peace.”³ In spite of persistent charges to the contrary, influential curriculum makers from both history and social studies have long agreed that their subjects share basically the same social goals.⁴ Nor have responsible educators seriously disputed that any comprehensive social study must include historical content.

Perhaps much of the confusion about the allegedly different goals of history and social studies stems from emphases and methods customarily associated with either history or social studies. History, for instance, can be associated with instilling patriotism, educating for democratic participation, emulating how historians are supposed to use primary sources, and so on. Similarly, social studies may assume various forms such as an expanding horizons sequence, the study of social problems, intergroup education, and so on. But these apparent differences in emphasis and method often turn out not to be as significant as they might appear at first sight.

In Practice, the Two Subjects May Be Indistinguishable

The stereotypical association of history with facts and dates may have obscured that school history programs have always been broadly aimed at social study.⁵ From this perspective, a recent press report is germane. The report reads as if the goals and content of history and social studies curricula are readily distinguishable. Specifically, it suggests that history might be distinguished from social studies by the perspective each, respectively, might adopt on Thomas Jefferson:

Founding Father; third president of the United States elected in 1800; and author of the Declaration of Independence, adopted in 1776 [or] Statesman, author, inventor, architect, but also slaveholder and member of the landowning elite.⁶

A possible implication of the second item, that social context and critical thinking are valued in social studies, seems correct. But it is also fair to say that many history educators would be troubled by the uncritical facts-dates implication of the first answer and, therefore, reluctant to consider it a complete or balanced representation of history subject matter. Moreover, they would dispute its concentration on political history, ignoring the social, cultural and economic realms which constitute the dominant focus of scholarly historical study these days.

Nor can history and social studies always be distinguished by whether the focus is on the past or on contemporary problems.⁷ For example, the eminent historian Charles A. Beard is generally (and rightly) judged a champion of social studies for his leading role in the American Historical Association's

Commission on the Social Studies during the Great Depression.⁸ He underscored that school social study, including history, must speak to the demands of contemporary living. Although Beard insisted that “the social studies should be the crown of history, not a substitute for history,”⁹ his “supreme purpose” for school history (and the other social sciences) was “civic instruction” to educate “rich and many-sided personalities.”¹⁰

More generally, designers of school history curricula have often pointed out that a comprehensive approach to social study must extend beyond the formal boundaries of history as a discipline to, as Beard suggested, the demands of citizenship in the contemporary world.¹¹ Thus, one of the most distinguished panels of historians and educators to study and recommend policies in American history for schools could announce: “The historian believes that knowledge of the past will help us understand the present, but he knows that his primary job is to explain the past.”¹² Following this ringing endorsement of disciplinary mission, however, the panel went on to declare that educators should attempt to connect what is studied about the past to what is relevant to the present: “Current events constitute a challenge, a kind of standard of measurement of the success of the pertinency of the history which has been taught.”¹³

By the same token, just as there is a reliance of history as a school subject on the other social studies, the latter relies on history and the other disciplines for purposes of academic rigor. These organized bodies of knowledge and their modes of inquiry bolster and deepen social studies investigations. For example, any informed study of contemporary globalization would surely utilize knowledge from and methods of the subjects of history, economics and geography.¹⁴

Thus far I have suggested that the educational philosophies of history and of social studies are more alike than has been widely assumed. In the following section, I consider how they differ.

History and Social Studies Compared

Where the curriculum maker begins generally makes a difference. Curriculum deliberation in history often finds its starting point in significant current historical scholarship. Commonly, this has led curriculum makers to draw on bodies of knowledge produced by historians or, on occasion, it has resulted in an emphasis on the methods historians employ. Curriculum makers must, of course, also consider more technical dimensions of curriculum design such as how this material can be simplified for immature learners and how it will be fitted into available instructional time as well as the existing curriculum sequence, and so on.

If the past is any guide, however, makers of history curricula are unlikely to stop at designing a workable version of current scholarship for the schools. They will almost certainly also be concerned with goals such as the education of good citizens and good neighbors. Practically all systematic curriculum development in history has claimed benefits from the study of history extending far beyond learning strictly historical information and thinking skills.¹⁵ In cases like the *National Standards for History*,¹⁶ for instance, a weak case was presented to link chronological surveys of history to life beyond the classroom. In other cases, however, a more persuasive case for the broader educational benefits of historical study has been made.¹⁷

Nonetheless, there is reason to question how effectual the discipline of history alone is as a curricular focus if our purposes extend to the demands of contemporary living. For instance, a frequently claimed benefit of historical study is the development of research skills, which aside from their use in the study of history itself, are supposed to serve purposes of citizenship education. But developing proficiency in the objective application of historical (or other social) research methods may fail to elicit a personal response from young people and thus holds a questionable relationship to goals such as educating more caring individuals or envisaging a better society. In other words, the mere possession of disciplinary information or modes of inquiry is frequently ineffective in promoting affective purposes. It is simply too easy for comfortable students to dismiss, say for example, famine in Africa or inner-city problems in the United States as distant matters legitimately outside their concern. Disciplinary proficiency may be no bridge to personal concern or action.¹⁸

Rather than beginning with academic material, an alternative that has commended itself to social studies educators is to investigate the aptitudes and interests of individual students, or the needs of society, or both.¹⁹ This view extends back to at least John Dewey.²⁰ At the close of the nineteenth century, he wrote in *The School and Society* of the possibilities of education in the life of the individual and its relationship to social betterment:

Here individualism and socialism are one. Only by being true to the full growth of all individuals who make it up, can society by any chance be true to itself.²¹

It is worth noting that a Deweyan view of social studies may end up with the same subject matter as the history education approach considered above—although it will probably be for different reasons and instructional arrangements may differ as well. For instance, as with history educators, Dewey placed great importance on the study of American history. But Dewey was far less interested in traditional political and military history, which then and now plays a central role in school programs. Rather, he emphasized:

Economic history is more human, more democratic, and hence more liberalizing than political history. It deals not with the rise and fall of principalities and powers, but with the growth of the effective liberties, through command of nature, of the common man for whom powers and principalities exist.²²

As is sometimes pointed out, Dewey's history of "the common man" coincides to an extent with the new economic, social, and cultural history which, as noted, has dominated historical scholarship in recent decades. Dewey's rationale for his stance stemmed not from a view that historians' current interests should be the engine driving the curriculum, but instead from the needs of students and society. Some contemporary educators,²³ nonetheless, seem to combine the best insights of recent historical scholarship and Dewey's philosophy, resulting in something akin to what I call elsewhere a "social education" view of history.²⁴ Finally, I consider why, other things being equal, social studies may frequently offer richer educational possibilities than a history curriculum alone.

From History to Social Studies

Even the best history curriculum seems limited in that it does not address the range of social study (and, thus, needs teacher modification to do so). One of the best history curricula I have seen is *What Is History?* developed in the United Kingdom during the 1970s.²⁵ This curriculum unit has many wonderful features. For example, the case studies are imaginative and age-appropriate, the learning activities are flexible enough to be adapted to a variety of objectives, and the sequence of the material is sensible and well-paced.²⁶ Moreover, a comprehensive evaluation study revealed the curriculum's positive effects on student learning and on their motivation to engage in historical study.²⁷

Even such a fine curriculum designed to focus on historical method,²⁸ which I have enthusiastically taught to adolescents myself, may hold less educational potential, however, than a curriculum that features more explicit attention to emerging student interests, current day problems, and so on. Of course, a good teacher might give a more individualized stamp to the *What Is History?* curriculum and students deeply interested in history will likely make individual and social connections for themselves. But one way of looking at "the heart of the matter" with curriculum materials, Elizabeth Vallance has observed, is to appraise "what experience the curriculum materials [*What Is History?*] make available to a student."²⁹ By this test, for all their commendable features, the *What Is History?* materials cannot, by their nature, address the full range of social study as they are constrained by what counts as valid disciplinary knowledge. The materials also seem constrained by their possible mismatch with what students already know of the social world, past and present. In this regard, Keith Barton³⁰ points out that developing a rich understanding of history in young people may depend on their seeing it as a part of a broader social study:

They...tend to focus on history as the record of individual thought and action, with little regard for institutional contexts. This means that educators must devote explicit attention to helping students understand how society operates (a core concern of the field of social studies, incidentally). Teaching about events like the American Revolution without developing students' grasp of concepts like taxation and representation means that the subject will literally be unintelligible to them....³¹

It may be, then, that the richest history instruction closely resembles social studies. Effective history teachers, for instance, seem to find ways to bring contemporary personal and societal relevance to historical subject matter that is well removed from the experiences and times in which their students live.³² Thus my view is emphatically *not* an argument against historical subject matter, but rather about its disposition and supplementation. As Harold Rugg grasped, the best *social studies curriculum* requires “more historical data than is found in conventional courses of study, rather than less.”³³ As Rugg also appreciated, historical material needs to be related to the present, even if only in small measure, for its full educational potential to be realized.

Subject matter in this Deweyan social studies sense, what I call social education, is not assumed to be of intrinsic worth divorced from its educational context. As Nel Noddings observes in this regard:

History, geography, and natural history offer the promise of self-understanding on the level of groups and whole societies, and self-understanding is crucial to both citizenship and personal happiness.³⁴

But Noddings is quick to add that this does not justify the role of these subject matters in the curriculum. Rather, she continues, “we have justified a careful search *through* [emphasis added] history and geography for topics that may enhance” our educational purposes.³⁵

Conclusion

Contemporary disputes about the relative worth of the study of history versus social studies often hinge on whether we assume curriculum making should begin *with* academic subjects or as a search *through* them for material relevant to goals that may not inhere in the academic subjects themselves.³⁶ Although the study of history can result in perfectly defensible instructional arrangements, I am suggesting that whatever subject matter we embrace should first pass a Deweyan test of its relevance to “the direct interests of life.”³⁷

NOTES

1. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer and to Keith Barton for their comments on earlier drafts of this article.
2. I recognize that history can be approached as a branch of knowledge while social studies is a program of study in schools, which of course contains knowledge. In other words, we could end up comparing apples and oranges. But my main concern here is with both entities as school subjects.
3. John Dewey, “What Is Social Study?” in *Teaching the Social Studies: What, Why, and How*, eds. R. E. Gross, W. E. McPhie, and J. R. Fraenkel, 5-7 (Scranton, Penn.: International Textbook Company, 1969), 5.
4. Joseph Watras, “Historians and Social Studies Educators, 1893-1998,” in *Social Education in the Twentieth Century: Curriculum and Context for Citizenship*, eds. Christine Woyshner, Joseph Watras, and Margaret S. Crocco, 192-209 (New York: Peter Lang, 2004).
5. Stephen Thornton, *Teaching Social Studies that Matters: Curriculum for Active Learning* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2005).
6. April Austin, “Historic Battles: History Teaches Dates and Facts, Social Studies Offers Context,” *Christian Science Monitor* (21 October 2003).
7. Joseph Watras, “Debating the Curriculum: Social Studies or History, 1892-1937,” *The Social Studies* 93 (2002): 245-50.
8. Charles A. Beard, *A Charter for the Social Sciences in the Schools* (New York: Scribner’s, 1932).
9. Charles A. Beard, “A Memorandum from an Old Worker in the Vineyard,” *Social Education* 2 (1938): 385.
10. Beard, *A Charter for the Social Sciences*, 93.
11. Joseph Watras, “Historians and Social Studies Educators, 1893-1998.”
12. Edgar B. Wesley, *American History in Schools and Colleges: The Report of the Committee on American History in Schools and Colleges of the American Historical Association, the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, the National Council for the Social Studies* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), 23.
13. *Ibid.*, 82.
14. Thornton, *Teaching Social Studies that Matters*, 64.
15. Hazel Hertzberg, “History and Progressivism: A Century of Reform Proposals,” in *Historical Literacy: The Case for History in American Education*, eds. Paul Gagnon and The Bradley Commission on History in Schools, 66-

99 (New York: Macmillan, 1989); Linda Symcox, *Whose History? The Struggle for National Standards in American Classrooms* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002); Thornton, *Teaching Social Studies that Matters*.

16. National Center for History in the Schools, *National Standards for History*, rev. ed. (Los Angeles: University of California at Los Angeles, 1995).

17. For example, Wesley, *American History in Schools and Colleges*, 24.

18. Keith C. Barton and Linda S. Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good* (Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum, 2004), 234-40; Jonathan Kozol, *The Night Is Dark and I Am Far from Home*, rev. ed. (New York: Touchstone Books, 1990), 182-87; Nel Noddings, *Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 299; Stephen J. Thornton, "School Reform and Social Studies Possibilities," in *Intricate Palette: Working the Ideas of Elliot Eisner*, eds. P. Bruce Uhrmacher and Jonathan Matthews, 183-95 (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Merrill Prentice Hall, 2004), 191-92.

19. Evelyn Berger and Bonnie A. Winters, *Social Studies in the Open Classroom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1973); Shirley H. Engle and Wilma S. Longstreet, *A Design for Social Education in the Open Curriculum* (New York: Harper Row, 1972); Harold Rugg, *That Men May Understand* (New York: Doubleday, Doran, and Co., 1941).

20. John Dewey, *The School and Society; and, The Child and the Curriculum* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

21. *Ibid.*, 7.

22. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1966), 215-16.

23. For example, Barton and Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good*.

24. Thornton, *Teaching Social Studies that Matters*.

25. Schools Council, *What Is History?* (Edinburgh: Holmes McDougall, 1976).

26. Stephen Thornton, "Subject Specific Teaching Methods: History," in *Subject-Specific Teaching Methods and Activities*, ed. Jere Brophy, 291-314 (Oxford: Elsevier Science, 2001).

27. Denis Shemilt, *History 14-16 Evaluation Study* (Edinburgh: Holmes McDougall, 1980).

28. Tony McAleavy, "The Use of Sources in School History, 1910-1998: A Critical Perspective," *Teaching History* 91 (1998): 10-16.

29. Elizabeth Vallance, "The Landscape of 'The Great Plains Experience': An Application of Curriculum Criticism," *Curriculum Inquiry* 7 (1977): 87-105.

30. Keith Barton, "Research on Students' Historical Thinking and Learning," *Perspectives: Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association* 42, no. 7 (2004): 19-21.

31. *Ibid.*, 20.

32. Stephen J. Thornton, "Toward the Desirable in Social Studies Teaching," in *Advances in Research on Teaching, Vol. 4: Case Studies of Teaching and Learning in Social Studies*, ed. Jere Brophy, 157-78 (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1993).

33. Harold Rugg, "Curriculum Design in the Social Sciences: What I Believe," in *The Future of the Social Studies: Proposals for an Experimental Social Studies Curriculum*, ed. James A. Michener, 140-58 (Cambridge: National Council for the Social Studies, 1939), 148.

34. Nel Noddings, *Happiness and Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 255.

35. *Ibid.*

36. Stephen Thornton, "From Content to Subject Matter," *The Social Studies* 92 (2001): 237-42.

37. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 209.