

DEBUNKING THE MYTH: THE SOCIAL STUDIES AND RIGOR

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The current debate over history and social studies is partially founded in the belief that an integrated social studies approach lacks the rigor of a history approach resulting in deficient content knowledge by students. Charlotte Crabtree of the National Center for History in the Schools stated that the only disciplines worth studying are history, economics, geography and government because the rest of the social sciences are “soft,” and of no importance. And, Crabtree continued, history has subsumed these “soft” disciplines as well as the important points in the “hard” disciplines.¹ Thus, the rigorous study of history through primary source documents and readings would be the answer to the lack of content knowledge of American students. This article seeks to refute that claim, recently reiterated by the Fordham Foundation publication *Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong*, by demonstrating that a rigorous, integrated social studies approach will be successful in improving the content knowledge and understanding of students.²

A starting point for this discussion should be an understanding of the term “rigor” in general and the term “academic rigor” more specifically. Rigor refers to: “1) use of demanding standards [the application of precise and exacting standards in the doing of something]; 2) lack of tolerance [severity, strictness or harshness]; and 3) hardship [great hardship or difficulty].”³ The Latin origin of the word literally means “stiff” or “rigid.” By adding the word “academic” to create the term “academic rigor” there are several definitions that could be applied.

According to Tom Spencer, citing Robert Sawyer, “academic rigor represents a stress on the content, rather than the methodologies used.”⁴ While this might fit the Fordham Foundation’s vision, which in its report never defines either rigor or academic rigor beyond stating that history has it and social studies does not, there are other definitions of academic rigor available. These include “a real search for knowledge;”⁵ “thoughtful scholarship characterized by hard work—resulting in depth of knowledge and understanding;”⁶ and “both the focus of instruction and the standards to which students are held accountable.”⁷

In expanded definitions, it is not difficult to find explanations relating to a focus on essential questions and/or the application of academic concepts and accountability to high standards—concepts that are generally undefined but desired by parents and politicians. In fact, one definition read, “It [academic rigor] has become a shorthand way for schools to tell parents and communities that they expect more of their students than other schools do.”⁸ For the purposes of this discussion, rigor or academic rigor will be defined as studies that require students and teachers to pursue knowledge and skills with enough depth and understanding to be able to apply this knowledge and these skills in their daily activities, present and future. Thus, given the mission of either history or social studies in schools, rigor must be more than the acquisition of content knowledge; it is the ability to use that content knowledge to answer essential questions, to understand issues in depth, and to solve problems effectively in the context of active citizenship in a democratic society. The central issue that arises from this definition is how to best accomplish this mission in our curriculum.

Despite recent headlines that might indicate the contrary, it is certainly nothing new to learn that America’s school children seem deficient in basic content knowledge regarding United States history, world history, geography, government and economics. Students are now regularly given a seemingly unending series of high stakes, multiple-choice tests which include the National Assessment of

Educational Progress, the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills and individual state tests. The underlying assumption here is that the inability to perform well on these tests is correlated with the goal of creating active, informed citizens who understand their past and how it relates to the present and the future; and, to reverse this statement, that increasing performance on these tests will enhance the attainment of this mission. With that in mind, what exactly is the pro-history/antisocial studies solution being promulgated and what does this solution entail?

According to J. Martin Rochester, in his chapter “The Training of Idiots: Civics Education in America’s Schools” of the Fordham Foundation publication *Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong?* the solution consists of the right balance between civic information and civic interest. This balance is created by focusing on the following six principles:

1. The importance of studying American history—“*their* history—in its own right and not merely as part of some ‘integrated’ world history and, that this be a ‘more accurate rendering’....”⁹ The question of accuracy relative to different educators is explained as less emphasis on ordinary people and minorities and more focus on the accomplishments of traditional heroes such as Washington and Jefferson. This is particularly interesting as I just attended a presentation at the Virginia Social Studies Educator’s conference by historian Michael Galgano, who stated that if all we study are the “Founding Fathers,” without the context and understanding of ordinary American colonists and their lives, we cannot understand the American Revolution at all.
2. We should be more laudatory about the “extraordinary achievements of the American political system....”¹⁰ While Rochester does state that we should “acknowledge a racist, sexist past that still lingers to some extent,”¹¹ he cites Vaclav Havel, saying that we really cannot do too much better because ‘people are people’ and democracy will always be an ideal. Thus, we should downplay any negatives and focus on how great we really are. This focus perhaps creates much of the anxiety the rest of the world seems to be exhibiting toward America, given our current foreign policy posture. How are students to understand the image of America in the eyes of the rest of the world if we approach our teaching in this fashion? Of course, it is possible that this goal, understanding America through the eyes of the rest of the world, does not matter to Rochester or the Fordham Foundation.
3. “We need to stress the importance of starting with a common base of factual information about the American historical and contemporary experience.”¹² Note that there is no discussion here about the tentative nature of factual knowledge or about multiple perspectives in relation to what constitutes factual knowledge. This author, and the report as a whole, assumes an agreed upon factual base that constitutes American history and government that I believe many historians, in addition to social scientists, would find problematic.
4. A need to cultivate teachers who are not only passionate about kids but about their subject matter. This section continues by asserting that “process is no substitute for content.”¹³ In an earlier section of this chapter the castigation focuses on learner-centered approaches and society-centered approaches (defined as focusing on problem solving) as inadequate compared to knowledge-centered approaches to teaching. Knowledge-centered approaches, according to this author, are synonymous with teacher-centered ones. “Teaching about politics is more likely to come alive with a serious, captivating lecturer than with fun and games.” There does not appear to be any hybrid instructional strategies, whereby the teacher could be both knowledgeable and learner-centered.
5. “We need to engage students in the right ways.”¹⁴ This short paragraph focuses on what the author deems acceptable service learning, for example, children going to the polls on Election Day with their parents and participating in the *Kids Voting Project*. There is no discussion here of what to do about parents who do not vote, or who vote when children are otherwise occupied with school, etc. Note that service learning in general is not really meaningful in this context; although the

Kids Voting Project is said to constitute meaningful service learning, there are many service learning advocates who do not believe that *Kids Vote* qualifies as such.

6. “We need to create fewer doubters and cynics.”¹⁵ The statement here is that our system works, albeit imperfectly, and that promoting “intellectual and moral relativism” is a mistake. According to Rochester, we need to give “children the strong grounding in knowledge and values that will hopefully result in a greater sense of political efficacy.” Thus, intellectual truth and moral truth are given and thereby will create more political efficacy. In my understanding, a democracy is not based on the fact that the truth is a “given” but rather is based on the fact that discussion and compromise over serious intellectual and moral disagreement is how we best demonstrate our democratic values.

Is there anything positive in the myriad of articles and discussions defending a single-subject history, government, geography, and economics approach over an interdisciplinary social studies approach to this argument? In reading the discussions in journals and newspapers, the problem appears to lie in unstated assumptions. Neither approach is inherently rigorous. Rigor, in the final analysis, has more to do with what the individual teacher requires of his or her students than the subject matter of the course. I will use the Virginia Standards of Learning as an illustration.

Virginia has high stakes, end-of-course, multiple-choice exams focusing heavily on the acquisition of factual or content knowledge. The Virginia Standards of Learning (hereafter referred to as SOLs) are available to teachers with a teacher resource book that takes the form of a multicolumn chart. One column lists the “essential understandings” for that SOL, another column the “essential questions” for that SOL, a third column contains “essential knowledge,” and a fourth column lists “essential skills.” The “essential questions” column contains the important questions for that SOL which could provide a context and meaning for the “essential knowledge” column. As I have worked with Virginia teachers over the past few years I have found two problems with this approach. First, some of the questions listed as essential are not really essential, that is they do not focus on important or big questions; although, to be fair, many are well-focused, essential questions. Second, and more importantly, many teachers choose to ignore the column all together, choosing to focus only on the “essential knowledge” column—the acquisition of facts, knowing what and when rather than why or how—because that is what is being tested. Since the essential skills are rarely tested, teachers tend to de-emphasize or even ignore that column in their teaching.

As a result, while the course is touted by Virginia as being an academically rigorous program with high standards—and the Virginia SOLs are being praised by some of the most conservative organizations in the nation—there still doesn’t appear to be much real rigor or meaningful learning. Recently, a world history teacher observed, “All they need to know about Africa [to pass the test] is the salt trade, the copper trade and Swahili!”¹⁶ To his credit, however, this teacher did teach his students much more than those three topics, but he was able to distill everything the state deemed necessary into three categories/events covering all of ancient and medieval African history. How is this academically rigorous?

Given this position, that rigor is in the hands of the individual teacher and not the standards, does it really matter whether the approach is through history or interdisciplinary social studies? I contend the answer is yes, and that interdisciplinary social studies has the potential to create more powerful and meaningful classroom learning experiences for students. First, if Crabtree’s assertion paraphrased earlier in reference to history subsuming the other social studies is correct, then the approach she is advocating is really a social studies approach. In other words, a history wolf dressed in sheep’s clothing! Second, if the goal is to teach critical thinking and problem solving as necessary for active citizenship in a democracy, it is important to remember that true problems do not divide themselves neatly into separate academic disciplines but tend to be messy, overlapping sorts of things.

The problem really centers on teacher understanding of the subjects being taught and the problem of the political nature of history/social studies as a school subject. Teachers do need deep content knowledge and understanding of the major concepts of the individual disciplines that combine to create

interdisciplinary social studies. Clearly that might be more difficult to master with a multidisciplinary major than a single-subject major. A case could be made for that being the reason John Dewey, specifically, and progressive educators, in general, are so frequently misunderstood. A highly qualified teacher who takes a truly interdisciplinary approach to education requires a range of intellectual interests and knowledge—a true Renaissance person. The culprit here is the need for more intellectual teachers—something our society does not reward with either money or respect. In fact, intellectualism in general is frowned upon by mainstream American society.

Indeed, students do need content knowledge to integrate into their problem solving. To some extent, however, the issue is over who determines the factual content needed and the problems delineated for solutions in the curriculum. For those promulgating a history approach in the public press, the factual content is not an area of contention. In fact, in his chapter “The Student, the World, and the Global Education Ideology,” Jonathan Burack berates world history professors for preaching the end of the nation-state system and the need for global world government.¹⁷ While I am sure there are college professors teaching this approach, they surely do not constitute the mainstream of world history in this country nor does that “agenda” appear to have filtered into the consciousness of the teachers in our public schools who remain very traditional and conservative by all reports.

What is stated in this chapter is the real agenda here: to “stress the continuing centrality of the West; include other cultures but honestly—warts and all, East and West; note the contradictions of the global education ideology; stress the superficiality, inaccuracy, and blandness of ‘world cultures’ and ‘world history’ materials; [and] encourage stronger narrative history with a focus on moral and political action.”¹⁸ Thus it isn’t just more history that is needed, it is more of a particular approach to history with a particular purpose in mind. As Evans pointed out it isn’t only about history versus social studies but the philosophical beliefs and approach of the particular history teacher that is open for debate.¹⁹ If the Latin origin of the word *education* means “to draw out of,” then this seems more like a “pouring into” and therefore, counter-educational practice.²⁰

What does “academically rigorous” social studies look like in our public schools. For one thing it is substantive; there is significant factual content, problem solving, and critical thinking. The instruction committee of the National Council for the Social Studies recently issued an NCSS Bulletin containing examples of powerful social studies lessons that help define best practice in the social studies and focuses on integrating NCSS standards into rich classroom experiences for K-12 students.²¹ Phipps and Adler explain the co-necessity of the single subject standards operating within the larger context of the social studies standards as a way to insure that the factual base and major concepts of the disciplines are included in social studies classrooms.²² There are numerous examples of successful, content rich lesson plans in the professional journals for teachers like *The Social Studies* and *Social Education*, and on the Internet. The content and primary sources available to teachers and students overshadow anything previously imaginable and provide easy ways to remove social studies teaching methods away from lectures, textbooks and worksheets into the real world. Students, with the click of the mouse, can easily access databases to use information to create depth of understanding previously unthinkable. While WebQuests enable teachers to use inquiry strategies to engage students in meaningful problem solving. These examples do not shy away from the controversial issues and problems that intrigue our students and could help transform them into active, caring citizens.

The deeper problem is that many teachers do not use these resources. They are content with lectures, textbooks and worksheets. In addition, the implementation of high stakes testing, including fact-based, multiple-choice history tests, only reinforces these traditionally unsuccessful teaching strategies. We should have academic rigor in all our programs; there is nothing wrong with high standards. The question is the content of those standards and the kinds of assessments and evaluations that accompany them. If history has subsumed the social studies, as Crabtree indicated, then the real issue here is for history advocates to stop arguing with social studies advocates and for us to work together to provide these challenging lessons for students in classrooms.

The underlying issue is that we do not all have the same vision for our students. We all want active concerned citizens but that does not necessarily mean the same thing to all the stakeholders. The Fordham

Foundation publication *Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong?* makes clear that what social studies educators promote as critical thinking and problems solving through interdisciplinary learning, history advocates dismiss because they do not envision the same curricular goals definitionally. That becomes patently clear when reading the chapter “Multiculturalism and Social Studies.”²³ The NCSS vision of social studies preparing students to live in a diverse America with a multiplicity of perspectives does not appear to be shared by the Fordham Foundation. It is clear that their definition of history is one of a western-based, celebratory history packaged with fact-based and primary-source documents, and perceived as everyone’s unitary vision and understanding.

But in reality there is diversity in our classroom. We have nonreaders, homeless children and children in poverty, without proper health care or nutrition, in our classrooms. How does this celebratory version of history help them attain the tools needed to become productive members of society and active citizens improving the lives of all Americans? I do not believe that social studies professionals and teacher educators completely accept the view of the Fordham Foundation when faced with this reality. However, I do believe that many practicing social studies teachers basically teach that view, and yet their students still perform poorly on standardized tests.

Thus, the real threat is that social studies teacher educators are preparing pre-service teachers who will do less in the way of enforcing a unitary view of history as defined by the political right. This particular Fordham Foundation publication is targeted directly at the NCSS College and University Faculty Assembly, and its authors appear to believe, obviously incorrectly given the state of social studies in our public schools, that CUFA is making a huge difference in the way social studies/history is taught. In the end, this is a question of philosophy and values. What is the vision of America and the world that students should have as they attend school, graduate, and enter the real world of the twenty-first century? Which approach is better suited to achieving that vision? There is a deep divide in America and one place it is surfacing is in the battle between history and social studies.

NOTES

1. Charlotte Crabtree, in personal conversation with the author at a session of the draft copy of the National History Standards at the annual meeting of the Association of Supervisors and Curriculum Development, Chicago, Ill., 1994.

2. D. Ravitch, “A Brief History of Social Studies,” in *Where Did Social Studies go Wrong?* eds. James Leming, Lucien Ellington and Kathleen Porter (Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 2003) [<http://www.edexcellence.net/foundation/publication/publication.cfm?id=317>].

3. Encarta Encyclopedia, “Definition of Rigor” http://encarta.msn.com/dictionary_1861702809/rigor.html.

4. T. Spencer, “Essential Academic Work,” *Chronicles of Calvary Covenant School* 8, no. 1 (2002), <http://www.calvarycovenant.org/Chronicles/VIII-01.pdf>.

5. Ibid.

6. Education by Design, “Definition of Academic Rigor,” <http://www.edbydesign.org/about/ebdfaq.html#rigor>.

7. RichlandOne Interactive, “Definition of Academic Rigor,” http://www.richlandone.org/services/titleone/instruction/hotlists/academic_rigor/academic_rigor.htm.

8. Ibid.

9. J. M. Rochester, “The Training of Idiots: Civics Education in America’s Schools,” in *Where Did Social Studies go Wrong?* eds. James Leming, Lucien Ellington and Kathleen Porter (Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 2003) [<http://www.edexcellence.net/foundation/publication/publication.cfm?id=317>], 27.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., 28.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. D. Baker (social studies teacher, Stonewall Jackson High School), in personal conversation with the author, Mt. Jackson, Va., 2003.

17. J. Burack, "The Student, The World, And The Global Education Ideology," in *Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong?* eds. James Leming, Lucien Ellington, and Kathleen Porter (Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 2003) [<http://www.edexcellence.net/foundation/publication/publication.cfm?id=317>].
18. *Ibid.*, 65-66.
19. R.W. Evans, "A Dream Unrealized: A Brief Look at the History of Issue-Centered Approaches," *The Social Studies* 80, no. 5 (September-October 1989): 178-84.
20. T. Spencer, "Essential Academic Work," *Chronicles of Calvary Covenant School* 8, no. 1 (2002) [<http://www.calvarycovenant.org/Chronicles/VIII-01.pdf>].
21. W.W. Wilen, ed., *Favorite Plans: Powerful Standards Based Activities* (Silver Spring, Md.: National Council for the Social Studies, 2000).
22. S. Phipps and S. Adler, "Where's the History," *Social Education* 67, no. 5 (2003): 296-98.
23. L. Ellington and J.S. Eaton, "Multiculturalism And Social Studies," in *Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong?* eds. James Leming, Lucien Ellington, and Kathleen Porter (Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 2003) [<http://www.edexcellence.net/foundation/publication/publication.cfm?id=317>].