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Improving the Teaching of History: How can the Social Studies Methods Class Contribute?

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During the past two decades no area of the secondary school curriculum has been subjected to more critical scrutiny or a greater variety of proposed reforms than social studies. Despite this protracted soul-searching by social studies educators and the expenditure of considerable sums of money, the resulting improvements in learning theory, curriculum design, teaching methodology, and educational materials do not appear to have a very significant impact in most social studies classrooms across the nation.¹ Consequently, there is a continued need for occasional reminders that the struggle to improve social studies education will not achieve a very high level of success until more effective means of influencing those who teach in the public schools are devised.

Rather than recapitulate the lengthy list of familiar criticisms of the manner in which social studies courses often are taught or summarize the numerous suggestions for improvement, it is my intention to concentrate upon a single factor which contributes heavily to the continuing malaise of social studies pedagogy. I do this fully cognizant of the fact that my analysis of the problem and recommendations for its alleviation are not particularly original nor will they rid social studies education of all its ills. However, I am convinced that an important step in the right direction will have been taken if we can successfully come to grips with the problem I propose to consider--the abominable manner in which history, the traditional mainstay of most social studies curriculums, is taught.

A great deal has been written about the poor pedagogy which characterizes so many history classes in the secondary schools, and since the mid-sixties quite a lot of effort has gone into the development of materials and methods aimed at improving the quality of history teaching. Granted, less attention has been given to history than to many other areas of the social studies curriculum, and one must admit that some of the materials and methods designed for history classes are less than impressive. On the other hand, several very thoughtful and potentially helpful critiques of the manner in which history is so often taught have appeared in educational literature and some very promising approaches to historical pedagogy have been developed. Unfortunately, these positive aspects of the effort to improve the teaching of history have not had much impact and should not be expected to do so as long as a large majority of the nation's social studies teachers do not attend professional meetings or read the literature which relates to their field.² Moreover, even among those educators who are aware of the efforts to improve history teaching, there are many who for one reason or another have not seen fit to alter their materials or methods.

How then can the problem be dealt with aside from the development of a massive diffusion network encompassing the entire nation? There are many approaches which could and should be utilized if we are truly serious about improving the teaching of history. Among the simplest and least expensive strategies available to us in making more effective use of a vehicle which to date has all too often been very poorly utilized. I am referring to the social studies methods class--a potentially vital means by which we can reach at least those who are planning to become history teachers. Obviously, if the teaching of history in this country is to be revolutionized, much more is needed than effective methods classes. However, we should keep in mind that the methods class, limited though it may be, is a potential instrument of change which is presently available to us that can serve as one of many means to an end

even if more effective means must eventually be devised. It might also be useful to remember that if the methods class had been utilized more effectively in the past with respect to the preparation of history teachers, the task which faces us today perhaps would not appear so awesome. Therefore, the remarks which follow are directed primarily to those who teach social studies methods.

Like many educators, I believe that the continued dominance by history of the social studies curriculum in the public schools is unwise for a number of reasons. I would never argue that history should be eliminated, for if it is properly taught, it can be an invaluable part of a well-rounded education. But I would argue that history should not occupy such a disproportionate share of the social studies curriculum that it deprives students of exposure to the social sciences. While the effort to bring about a more balanced social studies curriculum must continue, it should be accompanied by the realization that for the immediate future it is likely that history either will remain preeminent in most schools or will be the core of courses such as American studies or world cultures which is often established to replace pure history offerings. Given this reality, more time and effort must be spent improving the teaching of history so that it will be a more useful and relevant mainstay of the social studies curriculum.

During the past twenty years I have had the opportunity to observe history being taught in a variety of places. My observations as well as numerous conversations with both prospective and practicing history teachers have convinced me that the most important factor determining their individual approaches to the teaching of history is their perception of the nature of history as a discipline. A particular perception of the nature of history appears to predispose an individual to a particular method of teaching the subject. Given the fact that a significant number of secondary teachers have a very limited understanding of the nature of history, it is not surprising that they are virtually immune to construc-

tive criticism or to most of the efforts being made to stimulate better teaching.

What is the perception of history which is so influential among history teachers? There will be variations, of course, since some teachers have a much more sophisticated understanding of the discipline than others. However, there are certain similarities in the thinking of many history teachers with respect to their discipline and these similarities are frequently translated into characteristic classroom practices. History is too often thought of as a distinct entity--a body of knowledge which possesses value in and of itself. In the minds of many teachers history represents a reasonably complete and accurate record of the past which should be learned for its inherent value and the many useful lessons which it can supposedly impart. Derived from this perception of history is the tendency to rely very heavily upon a textbook as the fount of historical knowledge and to utilize a teaching strategy that often involves little more than read, recite, and test.³ In the classrooms of such teachers history is nothing more than chronicle or compilation --a simplistic and meaningless condensation and organization of a mass of data that is fixed on the printed page. It is the product rather than the process of historical inquiry which is emphasized because the former is seen as being history while the latter's importance is only vaguely understood or appreciated.

Despite the intellectual shortcomings reflected in this perception of history and the general ineffectiveness of the pedagogical practices which flow from it, many history teachers refuse to heed the "unrealistic criticisms" of scholars looking down from their ivory towers, shrug off the negative reactions of their bored and frustrated students, and go about their business as usual.⁴ No doubt there are numerous reasons for such behavior including ignorance of instructional alternatives and the fact that it is much easier to teach in the same manner year after year than it is to expend the effort necessary

to become a creative and stimulating teacher. Then too, the human desire for certitude is more easily satisfied when one perceives history as a body of factual absolutes rather than as a discipline which is interpretive and ever changing. Moreover, those involved in the process of training of teachers are also partially culpable. All too often university professors, many of whom serve as role-models for prospective teachers, practice in their classroom what they condemn rather than what they preach. University classes which are characterized by heavy reliance on an authoritative textbook, a professor who imparts masses of factual data via lectures, an emphasis on descriptive detail rather than analysis, and examinations which call for little more than the regurgitation of factual material have done much to foster the impression that this is the only intellectually respectable method of teaching.

Aside from those factors, however, a very basic reason for the commitment of so many teachers to traditional pedagogy is their failure to understand the nature of history. It is true that many history teachers are reasonably knowledgeable insofar as the factual data they rely upon is concerned, but relatively few of them have given much serious thought to the nature of the subject they are teaching. Consequently, they are content with a teaching methodology which is a logical extension of a simplistic perception of history as a finished, packaged product to be consumed by students.

It is certainly not unreasonable to expect a person to think extensively about the nature and meaning of the discipline he or she teaches. When this does not occur, as is often the case, it is tempting to attribute the failure to do so to intellectual sloth or stupidity. This may well be the case in some instances, but the blame for many such failures must also be shared by those of us who are responsible for educating history teachers. For example, how many history professors make a serious effort in their undergraduate classes to go beyond presenting history as a mere body of knowledge and

engage their students in a consideration of such factors as historical evidence, inquiry, explanation, interpretation, or the uses and meaning of history? While history professors have obviously not done much to enlighten their students with respect to the nature of history, many of those who are teaching social studies methods classes have been equally remiss. The pious denunciations of traditional historical pedagogy so often employed in methods classes, followed by presentations of a few alternatives to the read, lecture, and test method of teaching history are not going to have a very significant impact on prospective teachers. Why are these brief and oftentimes intellectually deficient critiques of traditional teaching expected to offset the influence of role-models students have observed and perhaps admired for years? How can students in a single course near the end of their training be persuaded to reject a teaching methodology which is totally consistent with their simplistic perception of the nature of history if that perception is not thoroughly analyzed and debunked? Is it realistic to expect students to consider objectively the use of teaching methods and materials which reflect a more sophisticated view of history as a discipline if they never engage in a careful analysis of the perception of history upon which such methods and materials are based?

If we expect improved pedagogy from those leaving the university certified to teach history, then it is imperative that they be well-grounded in the nature of the discipline. At the very least, they must appreciate the fact that history is much more than compilation or chronicle and that an understanding of the process of historical inquiry is far more crucial to the intellectual development of their future students than the uncritical acceptance and memorization of masses of historical data. Above all, they must see that history is not what is contained between the covers of a textbook nor a standardized set of immutable facts. Too many teachers are devoted to the facts-as-history tradition because they have never examined its fallacies. Therefore, prospective teachers need to recognize that historical facts are

often ambiguous, that they are very scarce in some instances and overly abundant and conflicting in others, and that in any case what is presented to us by historians reflects a selection of facts from those available and an interpretation of those facts. It is history-as-interpretation rather than facts-as-history which must be emphasized. To the extent that teachers realize that masses of conflicting historical data must be organized and interpreted to have meaning, that such interpretations are conditioned by the background, interests, intellectual biases, and a variety of other factors which influence the historians who present them, and that historical statements about an event often differ from historian to historian because they are interpretations rather than a complete and totally accurate reconstruction of the past, the better the chances are that they will not succumb to the popular notion of facts-as-history. Those who have thought seriously about the nature of history recognize that "history is a subject of debate, not of authority"⁵ and that "it is interpretation which distinguishes history as a branch of knowledge from history as chronicle."⁶ Should we continue to be satisfied with a program or a methods course which rarely impresses these ideas upon our students?

Hopefully, after having an opportunity to consider a variety of questions relating to the nature of history, larger numbers of our students will develop a more sophisticated perception of the discipline. Should this occur it would not be as unrealistic as it now is to expect that when they begin teaching they will show more concern for the most meaningful aspects of history and less for the impossible feat of "covering the materials" and that they will be less prone to debase history by using it for chauvinistic purposes.

If the prospective teacher's perception of the nature of history is indeed elevated and refined by experiences in the methods class, a further positive result insofar as his or her pedagogical performance is concerned may well be less reliance on a textbook

as a major teaching aid. Under certain circumstances and utilized in a particular manner, a history textbook can be an effective resource for a teacher. For the most part, however, history textbooks are extremely poor teaching and learning tools and the methods class should make students aware of this. The task should not be particularly difficult if an analysis of some popular textbooks follows upon the heels of the class sessions devoted to the nature of history. The efforts of students to analyze a few textbooks combined with discussions based upon some of the better published critiques of history textbooks should make it rather evident that they represent the interpretation of a particular historian, or more recently, and editorial committee; that numerous facts are compressed into broad generalizations often presented as historical truths; that such revisionism as does occasionally occur stems not from concern about the latest scholarship or ridding students of the idea of historical absolutes but in the interest of fads or compromises which will either satisfy or avoid offending any group of potential purchasers; that scholarship is often shabby; that textbooks are generally dull and timid often ignoring or slighting important social, economic and intellectual considerations; that many are ethnocentric and chauvinistic moralizers; and that they are highly descriptive with little or no analysis, particularly in such controversial areas as economics, social structure, or recent foreign affairs.⁷ In short, the methods class should help students realize that most history textbooks used in the secondary schools distort, mislead, and confuse far more than they instruct.

Once students in the methods class have begun to recognize that many aspects of traditional historical pedagogy, deriving in large part from a limited and superficial perception of the nature of history, are intellectually indefensible as well as ineffective, they should be far more capable of and open to an objective consideration of alternative teaching strategies and materials which reflect a deeper understanding of the nature and meaning of history. This is the most propitious time to introduce stu-

dents to the best of the methods and materials developed during the past two decades to improve the teaching of history. At this point not only are they in search of sound alternatives to the read, lecture, and test syndrome which characterizes history teaching, but they should also be much better prepared to understand and appreciate the rationale upon which the best alternatives are based. Exposing students to such methods and materials prior to or in the absence of a consideration of the nature of history and an analysis of traditional history teaching will probably not have as great or as lasting an impact.

Obviously, a social studies methods class cannot be solely concerned with history and how to teach it. Recognizing this, as well as the constraints of time and the fact that none of us will approach a topic in exactly the same way, I have refrained from including a description of the manner in which I would deal with the teaching of history. What follows then is simply a list of suggested activities and readings which might prove helpful to those who wish to devote a portion of their methods class to a consideration of how history should be taught. Those interested in pursuing the topic will, no doubt, be able to add other ideas to the list.

- (1) Attempt to secure the cooperation of one or more members of the history department who have a particular interest in historiography and methodology. Utilize them as resource persons who can help students develop a deeper understanding of the nature of history.
- (2) Have students read and discuss several selections taken from the works of a variety of historians who have written about the nature of history.
- (3) Compare the treatment of several major historical events in the works of some historians from different time periods,

backgrounds, countries, etc. Emphasize the differences in interpretation and ask the students to try and determine why the historians reached different conclusions.

- (4) Have students read selections from The Reinterpretation of American History and Cultures, the 1973 Yearbook of the National Council for the Social Studies, and/or several of the shorter publications of the American Historical Association's Service Center for Teachers. These publications provide reviews of recent historical research and interpretations on a variety of topics. If given a chance to compare the treatment of particular topics in several secondary school history textbooks with those in the NCSS Yearbook or the AHA pamphlets, even though the material may be slightly dated, the students will find that the textbooks generally do not reflect recent scholarship.
- (5) There are numerous analyses of history textbooks which could be utilized in the methods class to familiarize students with their weaknesses as a teaching-learning aid. The most thorough and scholarly work of this type is a recent publication entitled America Revised by Frances Fitzgerald. A condensed version appeared in the February 26, March 3, and March 12, 1979 editions of The New Yorker. While somewhat lengthy, either the book or the condensed version should be read, at least in part,

by all students who plan to teach American history.

- (6) Have students read and discuss several articles which are highly critical of the manner in which history is generally taught in the public schools.
- (7) Provide students with the opportunity to review some of the innovative curriculum materials which have been developed in an attempt to improve the teaching of history. Ask the students to compare these materials with some traditional textbooks in terms of the perception of history, learning theory, rationale, objectives, and teaching strategies which they reflect.
- (8) Have the students write an essay describing their perception of the nature of history and how they think this perception will influence their teaching. Ask them to prepare a unit plan and/or several lesson plans dealing with a particular historical topic in such a way as to reflect their perception of history.

NOTES

¹Support for this contention can be found in a number of sources. However, the most comprehensive documentation is provided by Iris R. Weiss, Report of the 1977 National Survey of Science, Mathematics, and Social Studies Education. Report to the National Science Foundation, (Research Triangle Park, North Carolina: Center for Education Research and Evaluation, 1978) and Karen B. Wiley, The Status of Pre-college Science, Mathematics, and Social Science Education. Report to the National Science Foundation, (Boulder, Colorado: Social Science Education Consortium Inc., 1977).

²Richard E. Gross, "The Status of the Social Studies in the Public Schools of the United States: Facts and Impressions of a National Survey," Social Education, 41 (March 1977), 199.

³James P. Shaver, O.L. Davis, Jr., and Suzanne W. Helburn, "The Status of Social Studies Education: Impressions from Three NSF Studies," Social Education, 43 (February, 1979), 151-52.

⁴Gross, "The Status of the Social Studies in the Public Schools of the United States," p. 200 and Shaver et. al., "The Status of Social Studies Education," p. 152.

⁵D.G. Watts, The Learning of History (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), pp. 52-53.

⁶Douglas H. Strong and Elizabeth S. Rosenfield, "What Is History" A Neglected Question," Social Studies, 59 (October, 1968), 195.

⁷A variety of articles, dissertations, and monographs have been devoted to analyses of the shortcomings of history textbooks used in the public schools. Two of the most thorough and provocative works are Ray A. Billington et. al., The Historian's Contribution to Anglo-American Misunderstanding

(London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966) and Frances FitzGerald, America Revised (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979).