

THE PROBLEM OF GENERATING A ‘GENUINE’ SOCIAL STUDIES

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The goals of the social studies are about citizenship and developing persons. However, it has low status, tends to be marginalized, and is taught in much the same manner as the other disciplines even though “citizenship” suggests a seamless view of knowledge. This paper sets out the rationale for a research agenda to interrogate the problem of generating a genuine social studies. It does this by analysing the role played by learning theories—behaviourist, cognitivist, and humanist—in structuring the social studies learning environment in different countries and contexts. Theories of situated cognition provide a framework for investigating how teachers, educators, and students learn their environment, how they attempt to overcome it, and whether and how attempts at overcoming can be conceptualized more abstractly, leading to knowledge building in the social studies—more robust theories, concepts, propositions, and learning approaches. This study, then, is charting a way forward in reconceptualizing learning in the social studies so that citizenship and personhood can become more realizable goals.

Introduction

Much has been written about the ambiguous status of the social studies in the school curriculum—accountable for high ideals of good citizenship and becoming more human, and at the same time regarded as somehow inferior to the traditional disciplines of knowledge (Ross, 2001; Thornton, 2005). The fact that it cannot be pursued at institutions of higher learning and is essentially a “school” subject marginalizes its importance in the eyes of parents, teachers, and students alike, to a great extent. As a result, over time social studies advocates have tried to clarify the nature of the social studies (Armento, 1993; Lybarger, 1983; Saxe, 1992; Watras, 2004; Wronski, 1993), yet it cannot seem to overcome enduring critiques (Egan, 1983). The search is on for generating a *genuine* social studies; one more faithful to how it has been conceptualized by its founders and social studies writers and commentators, and one less influenced by the traditional attitudes and

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ideologies towards learning and knowledge in schools (Mohammed & Keller, 2004; Winch, 1958, 1997).

This article sets out a rationale for a research agenda that investigates the contexts of social studies teaching and learning in schools in different countries. An ecological approach promises to yield information on the environments in which social studies teaching and learning take place. This approach, which emphasizes contexts and environments, will focus on the skills, abilities, and dispositions of learners and teachers; the ideologies governing schooling (teaching, learning, and assessment); school organization; the prevailing conceptions about the social studies; the texts and other learning materials used; and the lived experiences of participants. Our main idea, which we want to pose for debate and discussion, is that people learn their environments and that the social studies suffers because of this (Lave, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991). It tends to be regarded as just another subject that can be transmitted as factual knowledge, and although there is more of a press today towards constructivism and humanist pedagogies, the social studies continues to be treated as “product” or a “given”—already fully worked out, as in a syllabus or a text. Even the notion of the good citizen is emphasized as output or a product rather than as an in-process, phenomenological issue.

Rationale

The social studies has long been entrusted with the goals of nurturing the good citizen and with becoming more human (Bohan, 2003; Carpenter, 2004; Mraz, 2004). This mission (Marsden, 2001), though, has been interpreted and re-interpreted in various ways (Crocco, 2004; Shudak & Helfenbein, 2005). For example, a fundamental divide in the arena of social studies education is whether it is highly disciplined—history being its main vehicle—or whether it is primarily interdisciplinary as suggested by its all-embracing purposes (Slater Stern 2006; Thornton, 2005; Whelan, 2001). At another level, there is the fundamental issue of whether it is about output as suggested by “producing the good citizen,” or whether it is about process—investigating the experiences of teachers and learners in exploring ideas about citizenship and cultural life (Trofanenko, 2005; Urrietta, 2005). These are major struggles that continue to obfuscate the nature of the social studies and how its original purposes (which continue in rhetoric) are to be achieved.

Despite valiant attempts to focus on the ineffable purposes of the social studies, it is still treated as a traditional discipline or, rather, as separate disciplines (Crocco & Thornton, 2002; Parramore, 1993). Attempts at overcoming this orientation tend to be neutralized by the

dominance of the disciplinary curriculum. In response to the wide array of habits, dispositions, and knowledge required of the “good citizen,” teachers have been harnessing an ever-increasing number of disciplines into social studies lessons, producing a multidisciplinary study that largely loses focus. However flawed, it represents an attempt to deal with these purposes, which are seen as unique and which represent a challenge to many social studies teachers. By contrast, a different premise about the learner and knowledge starts with human problems and issues (e.g., adolescent concerns in the secondary school) and attempts to build/interrogate ideas of citizenship and being better humans from such a foundation. In such a conception, the “disciplines of knowledge come into play as resources from which to draw within the context of the theme and related issues and activities” (Beane, 1995, p. 619). Starting from a “problem” invokes real-life situations and, thus, *the student as a source of knowledge* is emphasized over the discrete disciplines. Constructivist ideas about relationships between teachers, learners, and knowledge, though, have had mixed success to date, one reason being the “gatekeeping” actions of teachers, influenced largely by their beliefs and experiences of teacher education (Baker & Moroz, 1997; Pennell & Firestone, 1996; Smith, 2001; Thornton, 2005).

An ecological study that investigates the environments of social studies teaching and learning in different contexts is being proposed in order to examine the understandings and/or ideologies related to knowledge and learning that underpin the curriculum in those places. Specifically, we are interested in the extent to which a *genuine* social studies is being generated. *A genuine social studies* is understood as one where the social studies is rooted in the experiences and cultural life of the people in different contexts, and this knowledge is used to contribute to the developing body of concepts, propositions, theories, and ideas in the social studies.

Methodology

Situated Cognition

Various researchers interpret situated cognition differently, but it is usually applied to how concepts or the processes involved in learning practical tasks are learned more meaningfully in context (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Lave, 1988; Lave & Wenger 1991; Núñez, Edwards, & Matos, 1999). The main idea in the situated cognition view of learning is that people learn best in practical, everyday situations where they are called upon to complete a task within a natural setting, among others

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whom they can learn from in a sort of apprenticeship role. Actually engaging in the learning tasks helps them to make connections, some of which they devise themselves, so that they learn much more than the steps in an activity, and achieve a holistic understanding of the processes, problems, and possible solutions which relate to that activity. What they learn is their environment, which makes the learning palpably different from learning the same things in a classroom where, traditionally, abstract knowledge is the logical place to start. In this paper, situated cognition is applied to how and what social studies students, teachers, educators, and other stakeholders learn about the social studies. Instead of applying it only to student learning of a concept, we are applying it to how persons generally learn the social studies learning environment. It refers to all the practices, assumptions, contradictions, and relationships between dominant and other paradigms that configure the environment of social studies learning in school. Remaining faithful to the metaphor, then, if we want to study environmental conditions we will need something of an ecological approach.

Bereiter (1997) proposes that understanding how people learn can be penetrated using a basic three-step model of cognition. Firstly, persons learn their environment in a behaviourist fashion. Whether in a classroom or in a tailor shop, people learn what are the fundamental dimensions of a problem in that context. For example, even if a mathematics problem starts off with “Jane and Louisa have to divide 10 apples,” students in classrooms know that the storyline is incidental and that the problem boils down to a case of manipulating numbers and computing. They therefore learn that problem solving is about arriving at the right answer—the “truth”—through a static series of rational steps—the algorithms—and reproducing the same steps to solve similar problems (Lave, 1988). In the case of real-world situations, learning takes place differently, but people still learn their environment. Lave’s work among apprentice tailors in West Africa shows how having them iron finished garments or attach buttons and cuffs—the last stages in garment construction—contributes to a broad understanding of the whole process; later on they learn how to sew, and the very last thing they learn is how to cut (Lave & Wenger, 1991). For them, the environment is organized to stimulate learning that will eventually give a cumulative understanding of what a master tailor should know. In a similar sense, students, their teachers, and others learn what disciplines are like, what knowledge is, and who is a learner through experiencing the dominant learning approaches in our schools. Knowledge about the social studies, therefore, is learned within the parameters set by such learning environments.

Secondly, Bereiter (1997) says that people not only learn their environment but can overcome that environment. With the knowledge they have gained, they are able to create strategies, develop relationships, and modify practices to deal with problems and issues in their context. Overcoming their environment could mean, in the case of the social studies, the intention to organize multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches to learning, as well as experiments with constructivist pedagogies and authentic learning. It can also mean the opposite, a determined push by the “social studies as history movement” to assert itself in new ways to overcome the ambiguities currently plaguing the field (Ravitch, 1989, 1991). Attempts to overcome the environment may or may not be successful depending on the extent to which one could really overcome. It is instructive to note, for example, that even today in the social studies, “American history textbooks, in general, present a white, middleclass, Eurocentric view of the world” (Zhao & Hoge, 2006, p. 428).

A third level or phase suggests that human beings are capable of thinking of their environment, relationships, practices, and how they have overcome them or are adapting to them, in order to develop ideas in the abstract that represent knowledge and understanding generally about such problems or issues, which can be further refined in overcoming the environment. They can develop symbols to generate models to go beyond the environment. Bereiter (1997) likens this third level to Popper’s World 3, and in this dimension we see possibilities of generating a more *genuine* social studies.

Knowledge Production

Popper (1979) portrayed the worlds we inhabit metaphorically as World 1 (the material world or the physical and human environment); World 2 (the mental and subjective world of individuals); and World 3 (that of knowledge objects—theories, concepts, propositions, abstract knowledge created by the human intellect). Traditionally, much of our learning involves bringing Worlds 1 and 2 together to learn our environment and to attempt to overcome it. World 3, consisting of immaterial knowledge objects produced by humans, has the capability to go beyond our local subjective knowing. Treating our ideas and experiences as objects for further argument and scrutiny, Popper believes, brings us nearer to a more “truthful” understanding of phenomena—“to a fuller, a more complete, a more interesting, logically stronger and more relevant truth—to truth relevant to our problems” (p. 148). Bereiter (1997) takes

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this position as providing a basis for escaping the situatedness of our learning by building knowledge.

Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993) posit that knowledge building differs from learning. The knowledge we produce and learn is situated because of the physical and social situation in which it takes place, but this knowledge has the potential to go beyond what normally constitutes the practices of a community. In education, there is a dominant notion of knowledge as content, and when the learner holds it in mind this is regarded as understanding. This, however, is merely transmission and does not help us escape the situatedness of our environment. Bereiter (2002) later portrayed knowledge as a *resource* or *product* that can help us to extend and improve that knowledge, and in so doing bring a view of understanding as the establishment of a meaningful relationship between the learner and some knowledge object. The learner does not just hold it in mind. For example, in the social studies classroom (or any other) *problems* become the starting point for any study—problems of explanation. Theories, interpretations, evidence, ideas, experiences, and explanations become the “content” or “knowledge” that is studied.

Specifically, a study of citizenship should begin with problematizing the ideas and accepted narratives of who is regarded as a citizen and what citizenship is about. What explanations and ideas are emphasized in the text? What understanding of citizenship is being advocated—the process of becoming a citizen, being a citizen in terms of rights and obligations—or what misgivings, fears, and/or commitments are there in the notion of citizenship? How is being a citizen of the European Union different to that of being a citizen of Trinidad and Tobago? Taking apart the arguments, explanations, and theories of citizenship, using personal and collective experience as well as the knowledge in texts and other resources, focuses the learner on extending and deepening social studies knowledge—the so-called knowledge objects of theories, explanations, ideas, and so on. This is what Bereiter (1997) believes is *knowledge building*, and this is what we believe is important in generating a more *genuine* social studies. Such practices help to focus the learner on citizenship formation and human affairs as a shared or cultural study, valuing the importance of expression of experience and dialogue about experience. This is what a *social* study is about according to the fundamental purposes of becoming more social or more human—expressing, sharing, learning to accommodate other’s opinions, developing a stance towards knowledge that is open-ended. Even if in social studies classes the experiences of the learner are encouraged, to a large extent this is done to enhance participation and interaction. World 3, however, asks that this knowledge that the student brings and is

expressing has the potential to be debated, discussed, extended, refined, and transformed, without reverting to the textbook in the end as the authoritative source.

Learning Our Environment: Learning Theories

The major approaches to pedagogy—behaviourism, cognitivism, and humanism—reflect different perspectives on curriculum, teaching, learning, learners, and knowledge. These learning theories developed chronologically—the behaviourist school has had a long history from the latter half of the 19th century to the present. Cognitivism developed largely as a response to the narrow interpretation of learning (as overt acts) on the part of behaviourists. Humanism, gaining currency in the 1960s, continued this movement away from outside stimuli and construction of knowledge (cognitivism) to an emphasis on the intentions and feelings of the learner. While all are represented in schools, behaviourist and cognitive approaches dominate, and it would seem that despite many efforts at reform, behaviourism continues to be the more pervasive (Bredo, 1997). Interrogating the ecological settings of social studies learning environments is likely to yield contextual clues about the influences of learning theories on how we learn our environment, our attempts to overcome it, and whether and how we are engaged in knowledge building.

Behaviourist Theories

The major tenet of this approach to pedagogy is that learning proceeds from manipulation of the environment. Known popularly as SR (stimulus-response) approaches, this view of learning sees knowledge as being organized by the teacher in suitable formats (graphics, rote exercises, learning objectives, motivational inputs, segments and sequences of activities/stimuli) for easy assimilation by students. There tends to be a generic understanding of learners and learning. While it is admitted that learners have minds to think with (a neo-behaviourist view), how the environment is organized is believed to be critical. Learning, then, is a process dependent on bombardment of the individual by stimuli from the environment—a process that could also be described as socialization through a transmission model. Knowledge on the whole is regarded as fixed; largely facts that have to be transmitted to the learner. Where the social studies is concerned, the location of the learner and the teacher in relation to the subject matter is treated as quite unproblematic and akin to what obtains in the traditional disciplines, even though the learner is preparing to become a good citizen or more

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human. In developing countries, a growing body of research bears out the fact that the social studies continues to be delivered by expert authority and textbooks, and by teacher-directed learning experiences, which are then summatively assessed. This is especially true where the majority of teachers cannot access teacher education (Merryfield, 1988); where there are undemocratic political regimes or a strong religious orientation (White, 1997); where inherited authoritarian paradigms from the West are still privileged (Tabulawa, 1997); and where there is a press to maintain peace or the status quo by unifying nationalist narratives (Roberts & Locke, 2003). Interestingly, in Western countries, traditional paradigms also tend to persist even in the midst of a resource-rich environment, enlightened teacher education programmes, and democratic political systems (Levitsky, 2006; Werner, 1998). Mintrop (2003) in describing civic education says that:

Despite demands of earlier reform periods, civic instruction at the turn of the century, according to the experts, is still traditional knowledge transmission and very teacher centred. Controversial issues that could foster critical thinking are avoided. The reports speak of a norm of ‘conflict avoidance’ (Hungary) or ‘fear of politicization’ (Italy). In the US report, this avoidance of controversy is described as fearing to be ‘perceived as insensitive to any person.’ (p. 448)

The dominance of the behaviourist paradigm (or transmission model) poses as problematic, it seems, the extent to which people can escape their environment; for despite numerous attempts at reform, traditional values and world views continue. An ecological study of the social studies learning environment in different settings (including texts and other educational media) should contribute detailed knowledge about how people learn their environment, what they are doing when they try to overcome it, and what knowledge products are obtained.

Cognitive Theories

Largely reacting to the outward focus of behaviourism, cognitive theory moved the emphasis in understanding learning from the environment to the mind. A premium was put on identifying the various internal mental processes involved in an act of learning—memory, retention, retrieval, schema building as in formulating categories and concepts. While behaviourists relied on learning by trial and error in manipulating the environment, cognitive theorists emphasized mental constructs to be tested by the learner. In other words, once a way of negotiating learning had been devised, it was “tested” in relation to being able to demonstrate

learning. The field of instructional design, important in teacher education, developed around organizing teaching/learning acts to mirror what was learnt about how the brain processed information. However, strong behaviourist ideas such as the presentation and measurement of stimuli and response also became incorporated into learning approaches.

Bruner, like other cognitivists, viewed learning “as a product of thinking” (as cited in Bredo, 1997, p. 25), but went further to posit a close relationship between the learner and knowledge (the discipline). According to him, disciplines were bodies of knowledge with a logical structure represented by the sequencing of content, concepts, and propositions, but they also had a psychological structure making the learning of the discipline congruent with the mental processes of the student engaged in an act of learning (Bigge & Shermis, 2004). In positing a relationship between the learner and the thing to be learned, Bruner was trying to overcome the behavioural influence affecting other cognitivists; that knowledge existed apart from the learner. Bruner also went on to challenge prevailing ideas about the social studies. In the 1960s, he was instrumental in helping to develop a federally funded new social studies curriculum in the USA, which became known as “Man: A Course of Study” (MACOS). It deviated from traditional values and content based on history as a discipline emphasizing the Western experience, and tried to stimulate thinking about human beings in all their cultural diversity through an inquiry approach to learning. It focused on the common characteristics of tool making in human evolution, the role of language in culture, and that of social organization. It asked the important question in the social studies, “What is human about being human beings?” (Bruner, 1966, p. 74). We see a determined effort to overcome the social studies environment that was anchored in behaviourism, but to a large extent the acceptance of the curriculum was thwarted by an appeal to restore what was traditional. The course was discontinued in 1976 because of widespread opposition citing that it did not cover much of the content expected in a social studies course, and it opened to inquiry many cherished values in the American way of life (Evans, 2004).

Growing out of cognitive thinking is the conception of learning known as constructivism, based on how learners make meanings rather than how the brain organizes information. In this approach, the focus becomes more trained on the learner’s interpretations of the world built up through experience and interactions. Today, this approach to teaching and learning enjoys widespread approval; yet, to a large extent, it remains problematic to implement, reflecting again perhaps the difficulty

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of overcoming our environment (Cook, Smagorinsky, Fry, Konopak, & Moore, 2002).

Humanist Theories

This approach places emphasis on the central place of meaning and feeling in learning. It underscores the notion that knowledge never comes without feeling, and this can be independent of the environment or the environment can be mediated by feelings. It is assumed that the learner always has feelings about what is to be taught, hence the premium placed on the needs, interests, experiences, dispositions, and feelings of the learner as the source of knowledge or starting place for instruction. Both Maslow and Rogers stressed the idea of agency or the ability of the learner to make significant personal decisions, the role of education in helping the learner to develop as an autonomous or self-actualized individual, and the major role that self concepts play in this picture (as cited in Nemiroff, 1992). To be able to engage the learner, educators must be aware of how he or she is thinking about or reacting to some problem or issue in social life. Hence, educators must learn more about their students. Going beyond Bruner's (1966) idea that there is a psychological relationship between the discipline and the learner, in this view the knower and the known are inseparable—the learner is constantly engaged in learning, working out what it means to be human, or developing as a person. However, the learner is not engaged with disciplinary knowledge per se but with his or her own needs and interests. Humanists see the disciplines as reflecting the different ways in which people express their orientation to some fundamental values—for example, geography demonstrates the relationships between human beings and the land; history and economics, too, reveal what others think are deep-seated values in social life. Humanists believe that these values and relationships are important for children to learn about as they are all dimensions of being human—how human beings have thought about life and society—but not as packaged disciplinary knowledge. The social studies would grow out of the problems and issues that children or adolescents face as they grow up, which help to reinforce, generate, or establish their values and attitudes. Humanists believe that these learning processes are going on all the time and the school has to intervene and enable that process.

Learning theories provide knowledge and assumptions about how children learn and become translated into methodologies of teaching, learning, and assessment. An ecological approach to the study of social studies education in a wide variety of classrooms will provide insights

about how such scenarios impact on different categories of students (gender, socio-economic class, ethnicity, and ability levels).

Overcoming the Environment

Multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary efforts, as well as innovations in curricula and changes in learning approaches, have been variously employed in trying to overcome the environment of social studies learning. Essentially, this involved a re-thinking of the relationships between knowledge, learners, and teaching/learning approaches. That these efforts are not as successful as they were meant to be suggests that social studies learning environments continue to be sites where situated learning characterizes student learning. Efforts to overcome continue struggling with dominant traditions, ideologies, and standard ways of operating. Our proposed research project focuses on trying to understand, at various sites in different countries:

- the dominant and alternative approaches to learning generally and in the social studies specifically;
- how students learn their environment and how they overcome it;
- the conceptions of the good citizen or the human taught in social studies learning environments;
- how social studies teaching materials reinforce and/or question an output-related notion of social studies education;
- how social studies classrooms contribute to knowledge production in the field.

We contend that social studies knowledge is not something to be given or transmitted but, rather, it is built and developed through the experiences students bring to the learning encounter. Adherence to ideologies that regard social studies as education for historical understanding, or inquiry or critical thinking, or even citizenship, fail to take on board that in a very real sense students are educated *through* the social studies and not *in* social studies for historical understanding, and so on. These *purposes* can be kept in mind but they cannot mandate that this is what a social study is like, that students will be educated in social studies for good citizenship. Imposing a dominant view of the social studies has brought us to this place of contention, where having learnt our environment and the situated knowledge at hand, all the ambiguities and conflicting ideas about social studies continue to compete in an ever-constant search to unmask its *true* nature. To put our ideas to the test, we will embark on developing a body of empirical evidence on the nature of

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social studies learning in different parts of the world—the Caribbean first and then moving out to other developing countries. This should provide a sound basis for understanding what is regarded as social studies education and to what extent it is genuine, that is, emanating from the experiences and concerns of those learning to be the good citizen or being human. If it is that people seem to be only learning their environment, then a second stage of the inquiry will employ Popper's and Bereiter's way of thinking about World 3 and seek to undertake, with teachers and students, how their knowledge can be interrogated and extended into arguments, explanations, and theories constituting social studies learning.

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