

Redeeming Social Studies through Common Core State Standards

Mike Bucata

TE 802

Michigan State University

Introduction

Since the No Child Left Behind Act passed back in 2001, those devoted to social studies education have taken a backseat to math, science, and language arts. Some may say the social studies have been neglected from the benchmarks put in place by No Child Left Behind as well. Well, now here in 2013, another storm of curriculum change is brewing through the most recent forty-five states' adoption of the Common Core State Standards. Likewise, many social studies teachers are nervous once again, for these new standards bring a whole new approach with a new emphasis placed on literacy. For the K5 group, this means that the social studies are lumped within non-fiction reading and literacy standards. In addition, although grades 6-12 receive some more specific direction, the standards still have focus on the whole as a means toward non-fiction literacy. What does this mean? For one, it means that a number of social studies teachers may fear that they will have to slash content in favor of meeting English's non-fiction standards. Once again, like when social studies took a backseat back with No Child Left Behind, the social studies' brethren may feel like again they are being neglected and on the outside looking in. However, what if these new Common Core Standards actually bring the social studies back more into focus than ever before? The National Council for the Social Studies and the National History Education Clearinghouse are two organizations that have advocated for social studies curricula aligned with Common Core Standards. Embracing the goals of Common Core literacy standards will redeem social studies curriculum and bring it out from the cold and into the warmth of the whole educational living room.

In order to judge whether or not now is the time for a social studies revival, one could start to look at how educators are making a push to bring a renewed emphasis to social studies. As recent as September 2013, the "College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social

Studies State Standards” was released through the National Council for the Social Studies. Three years in the making, this framework was designed to help states and school districts blend social studies instruction into the Common Core Standards. Vice President of the National Council for the Social Studies, Michelle Herczog, states “That’s going to be a powerful tool to assist state and local districts in updating social studies standards in ways that will make them aligned to the Common Core. The good news is the Common Core State Standards initiative encourages and welcomes interdisciplinary teaching.” (Zalaznick, 2013). The best part about C3 standards is that just like its father, the Common Core, it will push students to not just memorize facts and dates but to being to make in-depth inquiries into the social studies and more importantly write about the more challenging and difficult concepts they learned. The National Council for the Social Studies lists its “guiding principles” that help direct the C3 standards on its website. The four guiding principles are:

- Social studies prepares students for college, careers, and civic life
- Inquiry is at the heart of the social studies
- Social studies involves interdisciplinary applications and welcomes integration of the arts and humanities
- Social Studies is composed of deep and enduring understandings, concepts, and skills from disciplines (NCSS, 2013)

The key element that comes from this new integration of interdisciplinary application of the social studies is that it helps prepare students to live in a democratic society such as the United States of America. Combining the different disciplines such as literacy with the social studies crates a dynamic that includes the humanities with the previously emphasized math, science , and language arts as an essential component to education. Through the use of Common Core and C3

framework, a resurgence and restoration of the importance of the social studies in U.S. curriculum will be established.

Instead of doing research on the background of Common Core Standards and its pros and cons, or diving into the specifics of the design of the Common Core standards, I wanted to focus specifically on Social studies and how it can make a comeback as far as getting attention as a core subject after being shadowed by the prominence of math, science, and language arts for over the last ten years. I believe it has been neglected, and pushed to the wayside. Treated like a “red-headed step-child”, social studies can finally experience a rebirth of sorts through the implementation of the Common Core Standards Initiative for literacy and the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies Standards. With a renewed focus, we can gain back the value of social studies education and its important role in the future development of our citizens in the 21st century.

Methods

During this inquiry I tried to find and examine the effects of No Child Left Behind had on social studies and the emergence of the adoption by a large majority of states with Common Core. Because Common Core is relatively new and very controversial, especially politically right now, it was challenging to find good journals and other resources that weren't considered opinion articles or similar argumentative pieces. Academic One Infotrac became my source of inquiry and research for this paper. Also, for the sake of my research, I tried to stay away from the broad background pieces that told the story of Common Core and its good and bad attributes. Again I wanted to focus on the positive and exciting potential that we now have with Social Studies curriculum with a majority of the United States adopting the Common Core Standards. Furthermore, with the recent development of the C3 Framework for Social Studies, we can

catapult social studies back in the main discussion with english, math, and science. For it is my belief that it is the main acquirement social studies education that helps students connect all content including english, math, and science to their daily lives.

Summary of Literature

Since the social studies were receiving a lack of attention, one should focus on what was being observed as late as 2011 in regards to social studies importance in schools. Some experts began to argue that the focus on mathematics and language arts left out the important social and economic studies that can help students connect content to their daily lives. Researchers at a National Research Council forum on social sciences in Washington suggested that the expansion of testing in math and reading under the No Child Left Behind Act has led to a piecemeal approach to teaching social and behavioral science subjects in the state (Sparks, 2011). Despite protests, the national social studies standards failed to gain a significant presence in national standards. S.G. Grant, the education dean at Binghamton University commented that “No Child Left Behind frankly left us behind, and the Common Core gave us a footnote” (Sparks, 2011). In addition, grim news on the social studies front for U.S. students in reporting of the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress reported mostly mediocre performances for students in geography, civics, and history. These findings can be contributed to how the emphasis on the social studies by policymakers, administrators, and educators fell by the wayside in lieu of math, science, and english. Furthermore, it was noted that it should be the integration of these content areas, not the separation of content areas, be emphasized. Again Grant commented that “incorporating perspectives from social sciences can help students connect otherwise-separated core subjects, like reading and science, to the interdisciplinary uses of those lessons in real life.”(Sparks, 2011). In real world applications, what Grant is saying is that we should look at

education through multiple lenses, and the social studies coupled with the other content subjects help us do that. We should not look at social studies as a separate entity, for this is part of the reason why students are falling behind in the social studies. Furthermore, with this renewed emphasis with math, language arts, and science at the forefront, the lack of social studies education creates opportunity gaps for students after high school. The integration of the Common Core with social studies and literacy combined provide an avenue to rescue social studies' downfall in U.S. education and deliver it back to the top of our focus in education.

With the adoption of the Common Core literacy initiatives, the teaching of the social studies can be enhanced. Steve Armstrong, president-elect of the National Council for the Social Studies and head of the social studies department in the West Hartford (Conn.) School District, comments "I am aware that many content-based teachers fear that if social studies teachers at the middle and high school levels are now responsible for reinforcing Common Core literacy skills that they will be losing precious time for the teaching of the content. However, if students can master Common Core literacy skills, they would be able to read historical texts more deeply and make more comprehensive arguments." (Hermeling, 2013). I agree with Mr. Armstrong with this view. Through Common Core, some of the standards include instructing students to "cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the context as a whole" (CCSS) for example. With this non-fiction literacy focus, teachers won't have to concentrate on content as much because students are learning to think and understand what they learning and gaining knowledge to apply it. This in turn helps students become more informed and self-sufficient which has interdisciplinary implications with other subjects as well. With a reduced emphasis on content coverage and more emphasis on how to learn the skills to become a better educated

citizen using Common Core literacy skills, students will know a clearer and more consistent understanding of what is expected of them to learn and apply to the real world. As Michelle Herczog states about keeping with the Common Core, “each series of lessons calls for students to actively participate in activities that strengthen reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills in the context of civic dialogue, debate, persuasion, and action.”(Hermeling, 2013). This itself throws social studies and literacy in the fire together to create a more effective and rounded education.

Another slice of the Common Core pie and its role in the resurgence of the teaching of social studies lends itself in assessment. With the renewed focus on literacy, some researchers feel that the teachers of social studies still lack adequate resources to implement that standards, and assessment is one of the biggest trouble spots. Because the Common Core presents aspiring goals for student learning and application of that learning in a real-world setting, standardized testing using methods like multiple-choice tests dominated the social studies but does not assess a great deal of interpretation of content. Alternatively, the social studies have turned to document-based question (DBQ) assessment made famous by the College Board’s Advanced Placement Program. The DBQ asks students to read ten to twelve documents, formulate a thesis on their basis, plan an argumentative essay, compose that essay, and then proofread it for clarity, coherence, and correctness. DBQ appears to be a good assessment based on Common Core by identifying those skills such as the ability to read multiple sources, evaluate claims, and collect arguments using evidence. However, researchers Katherine McCarthy Young and Gaea Leinhardt(1998) found that students often raided documents for appropriate quotes and facts but failed to analyze them as historical evidence. (Breakstone, Smith, & Wineburg, 2013). This led to researchers formulating assessment exercises called History Assessments of Thinking or

HATs. HATs are well suited for formative assessment, one of the most effective tools for improving student achievement (Black & William, 1998). Because of their structure, these HAT assessments not only show what the students are thinking but also allow for the teacher to see where students are struggling and give them idea of where or what to reteach.

Since assessments are such an important piece to the teaching and learning puzzle, Common Core standards allow these DBQs and even more effective HATs to aid in bringing the learning of social studies to the interdisciplinary approach. These assessments align with the skills brought on by the Common Core Standards. If students are to achieve the goals and standards, appropriate assessments are vital to those and it is important that classroom instruction can be monitored through student progress measured by these assessments. Furthermore, teachers are given a lot of flexibility for these assessments as well. With all this being said, social studies instruction can emerge and ignite understanding in cross-disciplines and be applicable to real world settings.

What the Literature Means

Bringing all the literature together ties into the argument for the new opportunity for a social studies revival in U.S. education. Now that standards and assessments are available and being implemented in the majority of the nation, teachers can now have a solid direction in which to tie into methods and practices of combining strong literacy skills to social studies education. The social studies have now been given a chance to rise up through the Common Core Standards and the addition of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for the Social Studies State Standards. Combining Common Core with C3, states can begin to upgrade their state social studies standards, and school districts, schools, administrators, curriculum

developers, and teachers can work towards one direction to strengthen their social studies programs.

Common Core and C3 say little about the social studies as a core subject. Instead, they shift instructional methods for social studies towards emphasizing the attainment and application of knowledge and skills to prepare students for college, career, and civic life. The C3 Framework itself organizes itself into four dimensions which revolve around the use of questions to spark curiosity, guide instruction, deepen investigations, acquire rigorous content, and apply knowledge and ideas in real world settings to enable students to become active and engaged citizens in the 21st century. This in my opinion is the golden ticket to why social studies education should be at the top of any focus regarding education of our citizens. Knowing that literacy skills serve as a bridge to content knowledge and the deep understanding of that knowledge only supports and connects why Common Core and C3 works and should be aligned with any academic program provided in the United States.

Conclusion

The Common Core and C3 Framework bring literacy and the teaching of the social studies together in a way that promotes meaningful and purposeful learning and understanding. One cannot deny how reading, writing, speaking, and listening along with other language skills is important not only for school and college, but for life as an educated citizen as well. The introduction of literacy and the shaving of time spent on content helps include the social studies into the interdisciplinary approach that will better balance education as a whole. When students can relate social studies content to real world settings in school, their careers, and civic life through the literacy skills gained by the Common Core and C3 approach, success has been made. Furthermore, students will be more motivated when they experience and acquire meaningful and

applicable skills in the classroom. The role that quality social studies education plays in our students' future lives is vital. It's imperative that we try to develop active and responsible citizens and prepare them for college and/or future careers through Common Core standards and the C3 framework.

References

- Breakstone, J., Smith, M., & Wineburg, S. (2013). Beyond the bubble in history/social studies assessments: to prepare students for assessments tied to the Common Core, teachers need tools and tests that help students analyze primary and secondary sources and develop written historical arguments. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 94(5), 53+. Retrieved from http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA320848239&v=2.1&u=msu_main&it=r&p=AONE&sw=w&asid=bb69b4c718b1a78dc0e1d8ab733477a3
- Hermeling, A. D. (2013, March). Social studies on the outside looking in: redeeming the neglected curriculum. *District Administration*, 49(3), 51+. Retrieved from http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA321680711&v=2.1&u=msu_main&it=r&p=AONE&sw=w&asid=d1138f3f721f2ca83229631bb08a339a
- Lamb, A., & Johnson, L. (2013). Social studies in the spotlight: digital collections, primary sources, and the common core. *Teacher Librarian*, 41(1), 62+. Retrieved from http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA349903214&v=2.1&u=msu_main&it=r&p=AONE&sw=w&asid=e5b30631de8f2b0095878c322cdb056
- National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). The college, career, and civil life (C3) framework for social studies state standards: Guidance for enhancing the Rigor of K-12 civics, economics, geography, and history (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013)

Sparks, S. D. (2011, December 7). Experts Say Social Sciences Are 'Left Behind'.

Education Week, 31(13), 10. Retrieved from

http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA274702774&v=2.1&u=msu_main&it=r&p=AONE&sw=w&asid=2c65df0e2cc6df33a6eeebddd2eaf71

Zalaznick, M. (2013, November). Time for a social studies revival? New guidelines

designed to blend history and civics into Common Core. *District Administration*, 49(11), 62+. Retrieved from

http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA350334841&v=2.1&u=msu_main&it=r&p=AONE&sw=w&asid=39c05f19df10dc99e477f008322d0bd4