Beyond the New Standards in Social Studies

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Since the late 1980's, education in the United States has been swept up in a movement to develop voluntary national (and more rigorous) standards in the academic areas, the intent of which is to create both excellence and equity in education. Standards have been seen as a primary means of making major improvements in the nation's schools. The development and publication of standards would be followed by the development of new assessment strategies, staff development, and improved textbooks. So far, standards documents have been created in mathematics, the arts, the social studies, history, geography, and civics & government. Other standards projects underway include English/language arts, economics, health, science, foreign language, and physical education.

Yet controversy has surrounded the standards movement almost from the beginning. Fears over the imposition of a "national curriculum" upon local school districts by the federal government raised concerns about the establishment of a body of official (*politically correct*) knowledge. Other concerns involve the trivial nature of some of the standards, and their sheer volume —particularly if one considers (in the case of our fields) the 1,000+ pages of the combined social studies, history, geography, and civics & government standards.

The philosophy of the standards movement has been based on an almost universally accepted notion of continuous material human progress, which underlies the belief that education must involve the progressive accumulation of knowledge and skills. The standards movement is also tied to the idea that this must occur throughout the nation as a whole, and is tied to desires for a

continued accumulation of more goods and services, more technology and a "higher standard of living." Such notions, however, are being increasingly questioned as leftovers from an industrial-era mentality which has focused on material accumulation as a universal goal. Quality of life issues are increasingly coming to the fore as we witness the decaying social fabric of our culture, the weakening infrastructures of our cities, vanishing small towns, and the deteriorating environment, just to mention a few of the dilemmas we are facing.

Assuming that the standards represent useful guidelines for improving social studies education, how can curriculum directors and classroom teachers use them to design and guide instruction? And secondly, to what extent are these or any fixed standards relevant to a rapidly and dramatically shifting cultural and societal landscape? And how might we move toward an education of lasting value for all students that has broad and universal appeal?

The first and most immediate issue at hand involves making sense of the standards at the levels of curriculum and instruction. To the average classroom teacher, the impact of the standards may not be felt for some time—at least not until they have been translated into specific curriculum documents at the local district level. District curriculum coordinators and their committees will have the more immediate task of determining the relevance and application of the content guidelines suggested in the standards documents.

The standards documents for social studies were created through the input of literally hundreds of individuals at all levels of education, and they all contain useful definitions, rationales, and guidelines for their respective fields. They are rich with examples of content, suggested teaching practices, and assessment strategies. Perhaps the most attractive and useful is the geography standards document, *Geography for Life*. Its *National Geographic*-style photographs, maps, charts, and geographic ideas make it a particularly compelling publication. One can obtain significant understandings about the field of geography directly from this publication. This cannot be said of any of the other documents.

Also useful is *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies*, published by the National Council for the Social Studies. While not as picturesque as *Geography for Life*, the NCSS document provides useful and systematic guidelines for developing or revising local district social studies curriculum, with an eye

toward its contemporary relevance and usefulness as a vehicle for developing civic understandings and behaviors.

With apologies to those (including myself, as a reviewer) who put in countless hours researching, writing and reviewing them, the history and the civics & government standards, are less compelling and more problematic than either the geography or NCSS documents. While the history standards documents (*National Standards for World History, National Standards for American History,* and *National Standards for History for Grades K-4)* contain much useful information, the sheer volume of their content expectations is unrealistic. It appears to be a case of a process that was dominated by historians who were unable or unwilling to make the difficult choices about what to leave out. (This observation comes from many of my social studies colleagues from across the country). And, in spite of the presence of many educators on the committee, the end result was a volume of content that would overwhelm even the most committed history teacher.

The publication *National Standards for Civics and Government* was developed by a team of primarily political science professors and lawyers. It reflects the notion that people operate primarily within a system of overlapping and interacting laws and governmental bodies, with applicable citizen rights and responsibilities, . This document can be useful for revising the content of government courses and for identifying ideas that can be infused into other subjects in the social studies curriculum. Because of its voluminous content, however, it might be perceived as impractical for the one-semester government course that most Iowa schools offer.

For these standards documents to be of practical value to particular schools and teachers, efforts must be made by individuals and groups to select the most powerful ideas and processes in them, and to augment those with others which have not been included—and there are many. Let me cite some examples.

The history standards document talks about grounding students in historical understanding, including chronological thinking, historical comprehension, historical analysis and comprehension, historical research capabilities, and historical issues-analysis and decision-making.

But in the limited framework of the time in elementary and secondary school, there is something far more important to help students understand: We are living at the edge of history, having

the most amazing tools ever available that allow us to look backward and forward in time, that allow us to zoom in to see the very building-blocks of life, and that allow us to zoom out to study the mysteries of the universe. Never before in history have we had such capacities for developing a perspective on the whole human journey. We must find ways to give students a sense of the significance of the amazing and unprecedented time in which we live, and of the broad perspectives our tools (computers, communications satellites, microscopes and telescopes, etc.,) are giving us. We can spend all our time focusing on the thousands of individual leaves on the trees of life, or we can spend at least some of the time helping students see the entire forest and the landscapes beyond.

One does not have to be a rocket scientist to realize that much of the classroom instructional time now spent on trivia might be more profitably spent helping students develop these broad perspectives historically, geographically, culturally. Using world history as an example, we can help draw students into a deeper sense of the changes which have occurred among humans since the dawn of time. Each period of time, each civilization, including our own, has had its defining characteristics. What were those characteristics, and how did they evolve into the next set of characteristics? What growth of ideas and knowledge occurred from one period to the next, and among and between cultures. How did ideas spread and how were they changed from one context to another? What patterns can we discern in the evolution of human thinking and behaving?

We can begin, as social studies educators, to develop such perspectives ourselves. Look at the broad sweep of human history, and the cumulative effects of all the activities which have occurred since the emergence of homo sapiens and the dawn of human consciousness. It is an extraordinary story that can be told in one class period, but can certainly be embellished over several sessions.

Students need to be given a broad context in which to place themselves in time and space. And this can be done in remarkably easy ways, by summarizing the human journey through story or with the aid of a visual time-line. One analogy I have found particularly useful is to use the height of the World Trade Center in New York to represent the age of the earth. Humans appeared and have lived on the earth in the space of time represented by the top layer of paint on the roof of the World Trade Center. All of human

history can be represented in that small fraction of space.

Then if you take the second World Trade Center building and use its height to represent all of human history, the top layer of paint on that building would represent the time since the birth of Christ until today. Those can be powerful analogies for putting things in perspective.

Now I'm not suggesting that we not take the time to analyze the spread of Islam, or the characteristics of the Mayan culture, or other such episodes in history. Events and periods have much to teach us about human culture and change. But as more historical detail becomes available, and more episodes compel our attention, we must remember that classroom time is not expanding to keep up with the expanding knowledge base (not only in history, but in all other fields as well.) We must make increasingly difficult choices as to what to put in and what to leave out. The standards can provide direction, but the individual classroom teacher is the ultimate judge of what gets taught and what remains for individual students to explore on their own.

The implications of these standards documents raises another question that is becoming increasingly significant. I have hinted at it in the above paragraphs. The issue has to do with the exponentially growing body of knowledge (admittedly, not all of this knowledge is useful), and the increasingly available ways to access that knowledge. I am referring primarily to computers, CD roms, and the Internet. And two-way interactive television in every home is just around the corner! These interrelated tools, increasingly available, are leading us into a universe of information that was beyond the imaginations of most people just a couple of decades ago. The implications of this for education may be more significant than we can imagine, even now. The explosion of CD roms, with their large storage capacities, have made encyclopedic collections of art, music, sound, video clips, and text available at very low cost. Schools are increasingly being hooked up to the Internet, which links millions of computer users all over the world, giving similar access to pictures, sound and text on just about any subject imaginable.

What this all means is not yet clear. But if present trends continue, it suggests a radical redefinition of the whole meaning of learning and schooling in just a few short years. Not only learning and schooling will be affected, however. Work, leisure, the

economy and other facets of our lives are increasingly likely to be affected by the combining of the information age with existing and emerging technologies. Will increased access to information through computer terminals make school buildings obsolete in a few years? What about equity issues? Will computers connect more of us together, or will we see a more fragmented society with more people just interacting with others through words and images on computer screens? There are other issues being raised that yield no easy answers: privacy issues and cyber-crime, just to name two.

Enormous social, political, economic, psychological and economic issues, issues which are at the heart of the social studies, are being raised by this trend. It is the most significant trend of our time, and more significant than any event at any previous time in human history. It represents a (potential) trend toward the instantaneous transmission of information to any location, to any human being on the planet, the Global Brain predicted by Peter Russell in his book of the same name published in 1983.

What are the implications for the human mind itself? This is the question that increasingly rises to the surface. Psychologists tell us that we use perhaps 10-15% of our brain's capacity. Will the increased availability (some might say intrusion) of cybertechnology into our lives allow us to tap into some of that unused capacity, or will people's brains become increasingly overwhelmed with the progressive accumulation of information? We as a society have barely begun to address the issues being raised by this trend.

The social studies standards can be very useful and helpful, but if we allow them, or any standards, or any fixed idea of what education is, to dominate our efforts, we severely confine ourselves and our students; we run the risk of limiting our insights, crippling our visions, and lowering our perceptions to the traditional, the immediate and the mundane. These are times when we are challenged to go beyond remembering (which has been a mainstay of education), and moving toward imagination in discerning what education might become.

The social studies standards may provide useful anchors in these times of rapid change. The standards are important for identifying a common core of learning for all students, a grounding in the essentials of education for responsible citizenship and cultural assimilation. But we must also be ready to weigh anchor

and, using navigational tools of both mind and technology, steer increasingly individualized courses through new landscapes of information and ideas that will hopefully take us and our students toward our collective responsibility of improving the human condition and the condition of the planet on which we live.

Suggested Reading

Peter Russell, *The Global Brain Awakens: Our Next Evolutionary Leap.* Palo Alto, CA: Global Brain, Inc. 1995.

Duane Elgin, *Awakening Earth: Exploring the Evolution of Human Culture and Consciousness.* Morrow, 1993