

Outcomes and Beyond: Social Studies Education for the 90's

By

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It is becoming increasingly and painfully clear to growing numbers of observers that we are in the midst of a period of profound technological, economic, political, environmental, social and global change. In fact, more changes occur daily, with greater impact, than at any other time in human history. Many, if not most, of our established beliefs are being challenged in one way or another. Some of these include: our belief in unlimited material progress, our faith in technology to solve our most fundamental problems, and our belief that we can control nature.

The challenges to these beliefs, however, do not represent challenges to our most deeply held values. On the contrary, our values—such as kindness, virtue, justice, love, compassion, balance, harmony, equity, wholeness, and truth—often temporarily eclipsed by our quest for material success, may enjoy a return to a more central position in our orientation to life and society.

As the pace of social change quickens, and these challenges to our beliefs increase, debates over appropriate educational responses will continue to intensify. In the face of this, we must return to a social studies that has as its central purpose: to produce enlightened citizens and to help us move toward the "good" society.

If we look back to the origins of public education in this country, the overriding reason for having state supported schools was for the promotion of "civic" education. From Thomas Jefferson to various nineteenth century educational leaders, the idea evolved that free public education was needed to ensure the survival of our republic—a republic that was dependent upon an enlightened and involved citizenry. We need to continuously remind ourselves of this fact as we debate not only social studies education, but education in general. In spite of the fact that, at the moment, education seems to be dominated

by the desire to prepare students for career and vocation—to ignore the role of civic education in promoting “civility” and the good society is to invite a continued weakening of our republic and the decline and disintegration of our civilization.

These may seem like strong and alarming statements, but an honest evaluation of our world today will reveal an overwhelming convergence of simultaneous crises. Even one of these crises—like our environmental problems—would be sufficient to trigger massive disruptions; yet we have at least a half dozen crises of equal magnitude, that could trigger a chain reaction of cataclysmic events.

Where education is concerned—and in the social studies in particular—we need to facilitate an unprecedented leap to higher levels of understanding ourselves and our world, for the purpose of helping our young people comprehend the cultural shifts and psychological dislocations that are occurring with such bewildering speed, and to prepare them for a world of uncertainty, where personal virtue will become increasingly crucial to the health of the society.

In the midst of these societal challenges, a new tool has emerged just in time to give educators an opportunity to facilitate a true reform of learning and schooling. Its name is Outcomes-Based Education.

While to some, it may seem like just the latest educational gimmick, Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) has the potential to become an extremely powerful tool in moving us toward the next, necessary, educational transformation.

OBE makes sense! Instead of giving credit for “seat time” and passing students along, from course to course and from one grade to the next, OBE demands that students demonstrate their mastery of the goals and objectives specified in the curriculum. Traditional Carnegie Units and school curricula and policies often result in students exiting from high school without having mastered even the rudiments of being an effective citizen. We have somehow gotten the notion that citizenship is just a spectator sport, like the endless football, baseball, and basketball games that millions of people watch on television. Citizenship is not a spectator sport; it requires the involvement of everyone, in the processes of community building and participation, and in behaving with “civility” within the interpersonal encounters, organizations and institutions of which we are all a part. (An important new book that discusses this important characteristic of civility, is M. Scott Peck’s *A World Waiting to be Born: Civility Rediscovered*.)

OBE honors the varieties of learning styles among people, and differences in the time it takes individual students to achieve understandings and to develop skills. OBE is naturally designed to encourage variety in specific subject matter to be addressed by the learner. OBE is also tied to a greatly expanded concept of measuring student performance in more "authentic" ways. Together, OBE, newly formulated "performance standards," and alternative assessments are on the verge of opening new windows to the development of educational transformation and school reform.

One of the most important characteristics of OBE is that it can easily be tied (and should be tied) to the notion that having all students cover an ever-increasing amount of content within a prescribed period of time (e.g., quarter, semester, or academic year) is no longer pedagogically defensible—if it ever was. OBE can become a dramatically liberating approach to both teaching and learning—at a time when such liberation is needed more than ever.

In order to frame the remainder of this article, I will use (as examples only) the nine state outcomes formulated by a committee of 160 educators from across Iowa, who worked from February 1992 until the spring of 1993 to develop a set of statewide results-oriented educational goals. Because of concerns raised by conservatives that these outcomes were an attempt to indoctrinate students with "politically correct" (and presumably inappropriate) values (an accusation that was utterly groundless), and because of a perceived lack of general support for them across the state (presumably because of the educational jargon used to describe them—jargon that John Q. Public was suspicious about), the outcomes project was shelved by the Department of Education. Although these outcomes were withdrawn from a process of eventual statewide implementation—as guidelines, not as rigid regulations for school districts to slavishly adhere to—they remain as powerful ideas around which to develop model curricula, in the social studies as well as in other subject areas.

The original idea was that the outcomes would be indicators of (1) what students should know, (2) what they should be able to do, and (3) and what they should be like. For whatever reason, the third (and in my opinion, most important) category was dropped. To propose what students should be like was perhaps too sensitive a category for educators to make suggestions about. These nine outcomes, however, remain useful indicators for describing what perspectives, behaviors, and habits of mind an educated citizen should possess.

These outcomes (which I will apply to the goals of civic education) were as follows: (note: Since a final consensus was never reached on the outcomes, the wording below is an attempt to synthesize the important ideas which were suggested, and to integrate them with my own perspectives.)

1. **Lifelong Learning** - All learners seek learning opportunities which will prepare them for personal and occupational growth throughout life. Rationale: Rapid change mandates that enlightened citizens adopt a lifelong commitment to self-initiated learning. This outcome challenges us as social studies educators to make learning attractive and compelling, to develop a continuing, unquenchable thirst for understanding that will continue throughout students' lifetimes.
2. **Life Management** - All learners manage life to promote personal and interpersonal well-being. Rationale: The complexities of life require the application of skillful decision-making, learning to accept responsibility for one's actions, a commitment to continuing personal growth, and a commitment to the well-being of the whole (the society, the environment, etc.).
3. **Problem Solving** - All learners identify problems, think them through, and make reasonable decisions. Rationale: Responsible decision-making in today's complex world requires enlightened, holistic, and long-range thinking. Many of our present problems are due to short-sighted, fragmented and simplistic thinking. We must help students understand multiple perspectives, perceive interconnections, and apply skillful reasoning to the design of long-range solutions.
4. **Commitment to Quality** - All learners maintain a commitment to quality in education, work, and other aspects of life. Rationale: The survival of the republic requires a commitment by all citizens to strive for excellence, for continued improvement of the quality of life in our society.
5. **Communication** - All learners communicate in various ways with diverse audiences. Rationale: Effective communication within and between cultures and sub-cultures is a key to developing shared meanings and mutual respect within the human family.
6. **Creativity** - All learners appreciate creativity and use it to improve and enrich their lives and the lives of others. Rationale: Tapping into the energy of imagination, inspiration,

innovation and beauty, advances the quality of our lives as well as the character of society.

7. Diversity - All learners respect diversity and promote equity for all. Rationale: American democracy is built on "unity in diversity." Equity is embedded in our heritage and traditions. A respect for those with different ethnic and cultural heritages, different religious views, and different life-styles, is fundamental to the restoration of civility in our society, and fundamental to the recognition that we are all part of a world that is interdependent and interconnected.
8. Environmental Responsibility - All learners exhibit behaviors that support a healthy environment. Rationale: A healthy and sustainable physical environment is necessary for the continued viability of life as we know it. People need to be knowledgeable about and committed to the principles and practices which promote a sustainable future for our descendants and for all life on the planet.
9. Group Membership - All learners participate as responsible members in a variety of societal groups. Rationale: Individuals in society live within multiple groupings. They live and act as members of families, schools, communities, states, nations and the Earth community. These memberships overlap, interact, intersect, and sometimes conflict. Learning how to manage multiple loyalties requires citizens who interact well with others and respect the human rights of all people, as well as the rights of nature.

Out of these outcomes will come specific "indicators," which are the various pieces of evidence that can be used to demonstrate whether learners have mastered the outcomes or not. Using the OBE approach, learners will have a variety of ways and less rigidly prescribed periods of time in which to demonstrate this mastery. Moreover, alternative assessments will allow students to compile a variety of evidence in projects, "portfolios," performances, presentations, and other pieces of original work, to demonstrate their mastery, either in addition to, or instead of, traditional paper and pencil tests.

From many critics of these outcomes, the cry arose: "Where's the beef?" Where is the basic content, statements which would emphasize essential understandings from various subject areas? For the social studies, where is the history, geography, government, and economics? While this criticism cannot be dismissed, it misses the point.

These outcomes represent the essential human qualities which individuals who are products of our schools should possess. Students should possess these qualities because they are some of the best and most important indicators we have of the characteristics of an educated, enlightened, virtuous and effective citizen. Outcomes such as these neither preclude nor inhibit the development of specific content outcomes, such as those for history, geography, and so on. They do, however, represent the idea that quality is more important than quantity, and that virtue is more important than mere intellect or academic prowess.

The National Council for the Social Studies is moving toward a consideration of new curriculum/performance standards for the social studies. These standards, now in draft form, appear to be very consistent with an outcomes based approach. Another major project, however—the National History Standards Project—is still tied to an ever-increasing volume of subject matter content. The NCSS approach is clearly more consistent with the perspectives expressed above.

Much needs to be done to develop appropriate indicators and useful approaches to "alternative" assessments within the OBE framework. It will be a formidable task, involving a considerable amount of staff development, innovative curriculum development, appropriate integration of materials and technology, and above all, a willingness among all educators to seriously consider OBE as an idea whose time has come.

Suggested Reading

- Robert N. Bellah, et. al., *The Good Society*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991.
- Bohm, David and Mark Edwards. *Changing Consciousness: Exploring the Hidden Source of the Social, Political, and Environmental Crises Facing Our World*. Harper San Francisco, 1991.
- M. Scott Peck, *A World Waiting to Be Born: Civility Rediscovered*. New York: Bantam Books, 1993.
- Daly, Herman E. and John B. Cobb. *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989.