

# OBSERVATIONS ON THE SOCIAL STUDIES DURING A LIFETIME OF TEACHING

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**R**eviewing the numerous changes that took place in the social studies during a lifetime of teaching begins by establishing a benchmark from which one can view changes. To accomplish this I decided to augment my shaky memory by looking at the social studies as reflected in the numerous NCSS publications for 1961-1969, which covers most of the years of my public school teaching before arriving at Iowa State University in the fall of 1969. From this analysis of the past, it should be easier to describe the changes that have taken place during my tenure as a teacher of history and a trainer of teachers. Not every change, however, will be linear. Some changes are cyclical. In an educational context this is known as reinventing the wheel.

Comparing the past with the present begins by selecting significant areas for comparing the similarities and differences. For this limited analysis I've chosen the following areas: the role of history in citizenship education, child centered teaching strategies, teacher training, multicultural/non-sexist education, and instructional materials.

Although the debate over the role of history in citizenship education is over a century old, it has been particularly confrontational during my stay in Iowa, partly because my joint appointment in education and history often forced me to straddle both sides. Since historians like to frame all issues in an historical context, this discussion begins by tracing the debate's origins. According to Hazel Hertzberg, who has written extensively on the development of the social studies in the last century, this debate has pitted those who advocate a discipline oriented or what calls a "federated curriculum" against those who advocate a social studies or "fusionists" curriculum. Both sides agree that citizenship education is the primary purpose of history and the social sciences.

Citizenship education as the primary goal of education represented a change that took place at the beginning of the century with the advent of the comprehensive high school and the rise of progressivism. Consequently citizenship education could no longer be confined to a few, but must be for everyone. Since most students would end their education after high school there would not be sufficient time to provide the whole population with the traditional classical education that so ably trained our founders. The nation now required a collective memory that clearly connected American History to republican principles. To do this, the public school curriculum must become more functional or utilitarian.

The first step in the emergence of the social studies as a discipline occurred in 1916 when the National Education Association committee on the Social Studies recommended a curriculum based on the "new history." The report "urged a topical approach to history." Topics should be selected with reference to the pupil's own immediate interest and general social significance. The new history curriculum increased American history and contemporary history at the expense of English history. The committee went on to use the term social studies, defining it as those courses "whose subject matter relates directly to the organization and development of human society, and to man as a member of social groups."



Although social educators and their critics trace the beginning of the Social Studies with the 1916 report, the committee defined the term in the context of “who we are,” not “what we do.” The curriculum recommended by the report ultimately became the standard curriculum for most high schools and continues to this day. The argument between the “federalists” and the “fusionists” shifted in the 1930s to “what we do.” It is the crux of the argument that began to heat up during the development of the “new social studies” in the 1960s. This point can be aptly illustrated by looking at several articles published on the subject in two 1967 issues of *Social Education*.

The March issue reported two addresses on the subject at the annual NCSS Conference the previous year. The first was given by Paul Ward, Executive Secretary of the American Historical Association, presented a qualified defense of history by advocating historical inquiry rather than historical memory. How history is taught, he argued, is more important than what is taught. Ward’s article produced little criticism. The other article by William Cartwright, surprisingly a Professor of Education at Duke University, focused on the importance of history in the curriculum by stating, “history should be the core and the unifying agent of the social studies.” His position brought immediate criticism. One critic stated that history should not be the core of the curriculum but that it should become the tool of the social sciences. This set the stage for the November 1967 issue that placed two developers of the New Social Studies history projects, Edwin Fenton and Richard Brown, at odds with social studies educators. James Shaver, for example, argued that although “We find in social studies publications an abundance of grand statements about responsibility for citizenship education and the need to educate reflective, intelligent, rational citizens to participate in the decision-making processes of free society,” yet “social studies” curriculum projects, textbooks, and classrooms reflect little direct concern with analytic concepts appropriate to analyzing public issues.” The New Social Studies impact on the curriculum, despite the rhetoric, was negligible. The old history, not the New Social Studies, continued to dominate most classrooms as it had for half a century.

Publication of *The Nation at Risk* in 1984 spawned an era of reform. Several curricular reform proposals were developed in the late 1980s, including a traditional curriculum co-sponsored by the NCSS, American

Good teachers have always focused on thinking rather than memory that included a heavy use of primary sources. Our history department at Interlake high school where I taught before arriving at Iowa State, for example, issued no textbooks. But this was an exception. Few of the new social studies projects were published, thus limiting their use in most classrooms. With the development of national standards one might expect to find a re-emphasis on teaching critical thinking. Unfortunately, this ran counter to the emerging accountability movement and the trend toward state testing that places memory ahead of critical thinking. The textbook, then, has continued to determine what is taught in most classrooms.

One of the clearest differences that emerged when comparing the list of NCSS publications during the 1960s with the present can be found in the area of multicultural and non/sexist education. The topic "Negro history and thought" is the only multicultural reference noted in the bibliography. There is not a single reference to Latinos, Native Americans, ethnicity, or women. It is obvious that multicultural/non-sexist topics have broadened considerably over the last three decades, but this momentum has slowed. In the 1990s we've seen affirmative action programs, for example, come under attack and in some states, abolished. English as an official language has been advocated in numerous state legislatures. Multicultural education continues to be broadened to including this country's new immigration, but its impact on the curriculum has weakened.

No change has been more dramatic during my career as a teacher educator than that of technology. When I began teaching, technology consisted of maps and globes, films, overheads or opaque projectors, and ditto or mimeograph reproduction. Now I enter my classroom armed with a computer, LCD, VCR, and Laser Discs player that enables me to present Power Point Lectures and hyper studio driven laser disc presentations. We've come a long way. In my methods book, for example, I suggested that one method for teaching critical viewing would be to have students learn how editing affects what we view by editing their own films. Such an activity, at that time, while instructional, would have required considerably equipment and skills that made the activity impractical. Within a few years videotape, laser discs, computers, and now DVDs made this teaching strategy possible. Although this new technology exploded in the 1990s, its use



Historical Association, and the Organization of American Historians entitled, *Charting a Course*. This proposal came under heavy attack from social studies advocates.

The NCSS and other curriculum reforms were followed by the development of national standards in several disciplines and the social studies. Nowhere was this century-long curricular debate made clearer than in comparing the National History Standards with the Social Studies Standards developed by the NCSS. The Social Studies Standards were an attempt to implement the definition of the social studies as an "integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence" adopted by the NCSS in 1992. States, except of course Iowa whose leaders have preferred to hunker down and live on past accomplishments, began developing state standards, picking and choosing from the national standards, including those of the NCSS.

School reality, however, has remained pretty much the same in most states. Although social studies educators continued to insist that a social studies curriculum as defined by the NCSS be implemented in our schools, American history, world history, sociology, American government, and other social sciences with some interest in issue oriented courses, have continued to dominate the nation's schools. Our goal, I've argued in numerous articles, should be to teach better history, better. Nevertheless, the mythology that social studies exists anywhere but in the minds of the social studies advocates persists. This debate has continued, but only as a mere academic exercise divorced from the reality of the classroom.

In 1974 I authored a book entitled: *Involving Students in the New Social Studies*. It focused on developing child-centered strategies to teach history. The book, a summary of my high school teaching experience emphasized cooperative learning, including such activities as the Jigsaw. These strategies were nothing new to good teachers. The New Social Studies, for example, reinvented the inquiry methods developed at the turn of the century. The goal of the numerous new social studies projects was to teach the various disciplines by teaching students the skills used by academics in each of the disciplines. Textbooks in the new history did not present an historical narrative, for example, but primary documents from which students could draw their own conclusions or develop their own history.

in the classroom increases at a snails pace because teachers lacked necessary equipment, needed technology skills, and more importantly, the will and time needed to succeed.

Finally, I would like to discuss teacher training. My early experience is too mundane to recount. My instructors personified the dictum: do as I say, not as I do. One reason I came to Iowa State in 1969 was that opportunity to both “say” and “do” because I would teach history to those who would become history teachers. This arrangement, a joint appointment in history and secondary education, is unique among teacher training institutions. Although joint appointments enable history and other professors to practice what they preach, joint appointments may not last beyond my retirement.

In addition to developing needed skills in technology, pre-service teachers are getting earlier experiences in the classroom. Teachers are become more involved in teacher training. For the last 15 years, for example, my methods class has been taught at Ames High School rather than on campus with the collaboration of five high school teachers. Jim Duea, an Ames High instructor teaches the history/social science methods class when I’m on phased retirement in the spring. He will teach the class full time when I fully retire in December 2001.

This nostalgic journey has looked at numerous changes over the last three decades. Although some teaching issues, materials, and strategies have disappeared and some new ones have emerged, most, it seems have been merely re-cycled. Let’s hope the next person who writes about a thirty-year journey, as a teacher educator, will be able to report more substantial and lasting changes.

## Biography

*Professor Clair W. Keller has held a joint appointment in the Departments of History and Curriculum and Instruction at Iowa State University since 1969. He has two years remaining on phased retirement. During his career at Iowa State he has published numerous articles and books on history and teaching history and given over 100 national, regional, and state presentations. Since 1987 he has portrayed George Washington in over 300 historical press conferences to students and adults. Last fall ICSS named a Developmental Instructional Project Grant after him.*