

Living Outside of the Box



by
Dawn Remsburg

*"If a nation expects to be ignorant and free
in a state of civilization,
it expects what never was and never will be."*

Thomas Jefferson, 1816

Imagine you live inside a box. It has no windows or door. You drink the rain water that seeps through the lid. You eat the bugs that crawl up from the ground. All noise and discussion that you hear is filtered through the cardboard. There is no need for knowledge of government, geography, economics, people or cultures. This is a world without social studies.

In an 1818 report for the University of Virginia, Thomas Jefferson addressed "the objects of ... primary education [which] determine its character and limits." These were,

To give to every citizen the information he needs for the transaction of his own business; to enable him to calculate for himself, and to express and preserve his ideas, his contracts and accounts in

writing; to improve, by reading, his morals and faculties; to understand his duties to his neighbors and country, and to discharge with competence the functions confined to him by either; to know his rights; to exercise with order and justice those he retains, to choose with discretion the fiduciary of those he delegates; and to notice their conduct with diligence, with candor and judgment; and in general, to observe with intelligence and faithfulness all the social relations under which he shall be placed, (Coates, 1998, p. 39).

In this statement Jefferson not only addresses the basics of math, reading, and writing but also anthropology, history, psychology, sociology, political science, economics, and citizenship. Thomas Jefferson saw the need to live "outside the box."

As a social studies educator in the elementary schools, I take very seriously my task of instructing fifth graders in the social studies area. The curriculum I am responsible for teaching revolves around units based on United States and Iowa history. And yet .. I do not consider myself a "history" teacher. I am a teacher of social studies. In carrying out my assigned curriculum, I help students study "people, their activities, their customs, and their institutions in relationship to others" (World Book Dictionary, 1983). My goals are to help students learn about themselves and others, how to interact and get along, and to motivate these same students so what has been given to us by our ancestors will not be lost. That is the role of the social studies teacher ... to encourage students to live outside the box.

Starting at the elementary level students can begin to understand political science, economics, anthropology, and citizenship. They can understand taking turns and the concept of "fair treatment." Our school has a student council, made up of representatives from each classroom, where students can have input regarding playground rules, hallway behavior, and special "school unity" days. As students get older they work in cooperative groups or on committees where they are responsible for the decision making. Often times they determine the method of how a "fair" decision will be made. Having elementary students put construction paper

ducks together in an assembly line can be used to introduce the economic concepts of mass production, supply and demand, and pricing. Selling brownies to pay back a loan used in buying tulip bulbs for the school helps students understand banking. Teachers need to relate these experiences with today's global world. Without them students do not make the connections between social studies and their personal life. They will stay in their own little realm ... their own cardboard box.

Anthropology may be a hefty word for fifth graders to say, but have them talk about themselves and the noise is nonstop. Students can take pride in their ethnicity, family, and community and are very willing to share when given the chance. Researching and constructing family trees can be a controversial activity in today's classroom. During a unit on immigration I often have the students research their own heritage. They share if they wish. However, it often produces the response "my grandparents are from Illinois" with the thinking that is the extent of immigration. With a little bit of help they learn that the family traditions may be from Italy or another country. Eyes light up when they understand that everyone has a culture and all types of people have contributed to the greatness of our country. They begin to show an interest in other countries and cultures ... they begin to climb out of the box.

The elementary classroom is where the foundation is laid for an understanding and respect for our democratic heritage and for human rights and dignity. I remember one student who entered a discussion with "I'm against taxes. Our government is wrong to force them on people." He was met with little resistance from others. After a fluency exercise in which governmental services were listed, the student was the first to revise his statement to "Well, I'm against wasteful spending of taxes." His classmates (and teacher) agreed. Students need to be involved in these discussions and activities. They need to learn that the month of November is when elections take place, that there is a difference between state and federal governments, and that the celebration on the "Fourth of July" is more than a celebration of the fourth day in July. Thomas Jefferson stated, "If children are untaught, their ignorance and vices will in future life cost us much dearer in their consequences than it would have done in their correction by a good education," (Coates, 1998, p. 38).

How many times have you heard ... “and these are the people who will one day run our country”? Our students will be the bankers who invest money based on an understanding of economics. Our students will be the scientists who will make ethical decisions on cloning humans. Our students will be the senators, representatives, judges, and even the presidents who will help guide our country into the future, and also those citizens who vote them into office. Now ask yourself, how essential is it that these students have a good foundation to help them “develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world”? (NCSS 1994). How essential is it that the cardboard box is recycled?

The time to educate the public is now. Our job as social educators is to get the word out — to our students, parents, communities ... and to ourselves. *Social studies is essential in our lives*. It is government, history, geography, economics, culture, and much more. Social studies is the understanding of how people can get along and work together. Social studies is having the knowledge behind basic principles in order to make reasoned decisions, allowing individuals to develop democratic values and attitudes for a responsible citizenship, and becoming willing participants in our communities and global world. Social studies involves climbing out of the box and joining the world.

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Biography

Dawn Remsburg has taught fifth grade at Meeker Elementary School in Ames, Iowa, for ten years. She is a member of the Iowa Heritage Education Committee and served on the advisory committee for *Prairie Voices: An Iowa Heritage Curriculum*.