

Philosophy as Outcomes

by
Judy Zobel
Fourth Grade Teacher
Westridge Elementary School
West Des Moines Community School

In the summer of 1991 teams of curriculum writers began to form the social studies curriculum for elementary students in West Des Moines. The district social studies committee had determined which units should be addressed at which grade levels. In order to write those units we were working within a broad outline of curriculum which ensured that our end result would include five strands of social studies:

- Democratic Ideal
- Cultural Diversity
- Economic Development
- Global Perspective
- Participatory Citizenship

In addition the curriculum would employ focus questions rather than objectives to determine the direction of the content.

Our team of three teachers developed the fourth grade curriculum. Our units included:

- Iowa Geography
- Regions of the United States
- Nobel Peace Prize Recipients
- Economics
- Russia

We found that our first step was to agree, as writers, what philosophy of learning we envisioned within social studies. This, as I see it, was our most beneficial discussion since it gave us common outcomes and direction. Our team felt strongly that the curriculum should:

- present dilemmas so students work as problem solvers;
- involve students in active learning of the content;
- encourage independence in learning; and
- include resources rich enough to allow for natural integration of other subject areas.

The district committee had planned to adopt a text to assist with one of the fourth grade units (Regions of the United States). It was our belief that, although this text had been adopted, we could nevertheless maintain our goals of student involvement. We agreed that our responsibility included teaching how to use a text as a resource, and yet maintain our philosophy of teaching and learning. To this end, only one social studies book was ordered for every two students. We wanted students to actively share what they were reading and to help each other with whatever organizers were designed to assist their comprehension.

Following is a summary of our experience teaching the Russia unit so the reader may examine how we attempted to put our philosophy into action.

The unit began with an event designed to duplicate a first day of school (Day of Knowledge) ceremony traditionally held in many parts of Russia. Students made flowers to present to their teacher, listened to Jr. High students from Russia, witnessed the parade of a first grader ringing a school bell and sitting on the shoulders of a high school student, listened to speeches by important people (the principal and superintendent), and even danced the Troika with their teachers. Following the series of activities, the students were asked to share their questions about Russia. What did they want to know? Finally, the students were given a schedule of study and their Russian "text-books" - blank booklets they would bring to life as the study advanced.

Each day students were encouraged to share facts about Russia. After all the facts were presented and discussed, the students chose two or three they thought were most interesting and recorded them in their "texts". As each child offered a fact, his/her name would be written on a slip of paper and placed in a giant fishbowl. When the unit was completed, students' names were drawn to receive Russian prizes.

Each student filled out a passport application and then began a study of the "Universals of Culture" to ensure that students would see that, although details of cultures around the world were unique, they also have commonalities. Consistent with our philosophy, the teach-

ers served as questioners and encouragers of thinking as the students contributed their ideas of what those similarities might be.

Students were then challenged to locate resources which would help them complete a comparison chart of the U.S. and Russia. These resources were listed on the board and then students began their work. Some of the resources included almanacs, atlases, geographical dictionary, computer programs (e.g. PC Globe), encyclopedias, and books about Russia.

The children rotated to each of our three fourth grade rooms using the schedule they had received during the Day of Knowledge Ceremony. The different classrooms represented different "schools" designed to answer their questions about Russia. The schools included:

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| -History | -Culture |
| -Language | -Sports |
| -Geography | -Literature |

All classes were two to four hours in length and included activities such as drama, games, cooking, crafts, library treasure hunts, writing, and drawing: all designed to actively engage the students in their learning. Within the content of the classes, students were presented with dilemmas which caused them to be problem solvers. As an example, students were asked, after examining Russia's history, if it would be easy for Russia to become a democracy. One student responded by comparing Russia's plight to being asked to play a game with a friend who knew the rules: "Just as you begin to understand the game, he wants you to play a new one."

Between classes all students gathered to listen to speakers who presented travelogues and shared cultural artifacts. As if they were suitcases carrying souvenirs of their trip, student "texts" expanded with their notes, their illustrations, and their glued-in products.

So much learning evolved during the four week study that our team of fourth grade teachers were constantly questioning and re-designing to include more and more.

- How about duplicating a Russian classroom in our rooms?
- Do you think our students will understand this morning's article in the paper about Russia?
- Can we hold an author's conference to duplicate those held in Russia?
- How can we connect our students with pen pals from Russia?
- Have we addressed all the student's questions?

We were truly immersed in the culture. Parents were communicating their children's excitement. Dinner table conversations seemed to revolved around Russia!

How were we to evaluate? Each student seemed fascinated with a different aspect of the study. In keeping with our philosophy of students as independent thinkers, our evaluation of their learning could not be standardized. We chose to ask the students to respond in writing to the following simple request: If you were to travel to Russia, tell us about what you would want to see and what you would want to do. Consistent with their interests, the answers varied from historical sights to natural locations to cultural events. This, along with a look through their completed texts and observations throughout the unit, became our evaluation.

Although this was our first year of including the study of Russian in our curriculum, we felt good about our beginning attempts. What made it work? We felt strongly that the philosophy we had spent time discussing and validating was the key to its success. That philosophy (or those outcomes of a social studies classroom) drove all our decisions and it will guide us as we rework the unit next year.