

SWAN SONG OF AN OLD SCHOOL TEACHER

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There are really two good reasons why I shouldn't be writing this article. First, I've been retired from the University of Iowa and teaching social studies for seventeen years and am thus "out of the loop" and out of touch with what is really going on in secondary education. Second, I'm really old and therefore confused by the geometric rate of change that is going on in the world all about me. Keep in mind the following facts as you evaluate the validity of some of my conclusions. I was born almost a year before Archduke Francis Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary was assassinated at Sarajevo, which led to the beginning of World War I. In 1913 bread was 6 cents a loaf, and milk and gas were 18 cents a gallon. A new car cost \$550 and the Dow-Jones stood at 80.30.

Try, for a moment, to recall some of the physical, political, cultural, social, and technological changes in the 20th century, which, in turn, have resulted in momentous alterations to the quality of life in our American society. To someone my age it is difficult, indeed, very difficult, not to develop a feeling of frustration, helplessness, and, to some degree, depression as I read the daily newspaper and reflect on the difficult, if not unsolvable, problems that confront us at all levels. When I consider that a basketball coach receives a salary of \$900,000 a year, and a motion picture actress is paid \$20,000,000 for a single picture, while workers in nursing homes receive \$6.50 per hour, then I am convinced that something is seriously wrong with our American sense of values and priorities. I am reminded that Plato observed in *The Republic* that "What is valued in a country will be honored there." Equally unforgettable are the words of former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop in a speech a few years ago. "Greed, racism, and abrogation of personal responsibility are the three deadly sins of American society," he said and that ... "this dastardly trio is

responsible for much of the nation's woes." He continued, ... "they are the least common denominator we could look to that produce so many of the troubles we are concerned with."

All of this is to apprise you that age brings with it some loss of resiliency to change, some decline in optimism, a deterioration in the ability to learn quickly, and an increase in longing for "the good old days." If you keep these in mind, it will help you to judge whether my reflections on social education and instruction in social studies in schools make sense and have merit.

Some Things I Still Believe

The ultimate mission of instruction in the social studies is, I think, the development of informed and participating citizens capable of understanding the major problems confronting a democratic republic such as ours. If true, this makes teaching the social studies the most difficult of all the varied portions of the present curriculum because it involves both the communication of relevant subject matter and the inculcation of certain values and habits of behavior. Furthermore, it can only occur in a classroom and school environment that is democratic, and a community climate that encourages the free discussion of diverse points of view and controversial issues. It goes, almost without saying, that it demands direct and frequent involvement in the community on the part of both teachers and students.

To accomplish this mission, teachers must accept the premise that the command of significant and relevant concepts, and the effective communication of them, are the primary goals of courses of study and lesson plans. The basic skills needed by informed and participating citizens are the desire and ability to read with comprehension about contemporary problems. The mastery of these skills must result in the understanding and conviction that the survival of democratic government depends upon individuals who are committed to the habit of participating in the processes of governing, for example, regular voting. Influencing the outcomes of governmental actions requires the ability to write clearly and correctly in order to communicate with elected representatives at all levels, local, state, and national.

Many of the most significant problems, which confront us, are highly complicated and difficult and require information from many different areas of knowledge if solutions are to be found. Social studies teachers are constantly challenged to find ways, which will motivate students to

discover and utilize information from history and all the social sciences in order to understand contemporary issues.

What About Learning Procedures?

It is of great importance that there be clear criteria for selecting appropriate teaching and learning procedures to accomplish the mission of social studies education. In the simplest terms, this means that the methods you choose must be chosen because they support and clarify the subject matter under discussion, not because they might or might not be entertaining for the students. Please don't get me wrong. Every lesson ought to be interesting, enjoyable, and motivational for the students, if at all possible. But not every bit of subject matter, not every skill that needs to be mastered, and not every behavioral habit that needs to be instilled can be made "fun". Some learning is difficult, perhaps even disagreeable, but it must be undertaken if true understanding is to be achieved. Students must be lead to realize what mature adults already know, that learning for the sake of learning is part of becoming a truly educated individual.

I am too far removed from participation in the classroom to be of much, if any, help to you who are there every day. I feel sure that most of you are already doing the things that I suggest and much more. You have one tremendous advantage, which I did not have -- you have at your command invaluable technology, which had not been as fully developed when I left the classroom. The potential benefits of the computer and the concept of long distance interactive learning for improved education are almost incalculable at this time. I am sure you are exploring and utilizing them constantly but I also surmise that you are finding that technology, like almost all other major inventions, can have a dark side as well as a bright one.

There are a few characteristics of effective lesson planning that I would like to call to your attention. It is obvious that daily objectives must be aimed at specific educational outcomes, which can, to some degree, be measured. It is a thoughtful, not a mindless procedure.

The nature of history and the social science disciplines, which provide the bedrock for social studies instruction, places some limitations on the methods you can use in your classes. But I feel confident that your creativity and imagination will find ways to do the following things, even more than you already are doing:

- a) maximize the use of real life experiences;

- b) use simulated situations as necessary, but make certain they approach reality as closely as possible;
- c) introduce as many “hands on” exercises as the subject matter will permit;
- d) use biographical and autobiographical materials wherever they will add color and realism to what is being studied;
- e) introduce students to as many original and primary sources as possible. The internet will be invaluable for this purpose, and students will likely be fascinated to do research in this way;
- f) take as many field trips as you can, both in the immediate community, but also to special events and places that will add life to your teaching. I realize that they are a pain to plan in order to secure administrative support and financing and to find adequate and willing chaperones, but my experience with them suggests that students will recall them with great pleasure many years later;
- g) make assignments which exploit the resources of the local community and utilize the expertise of local people who can introduce personal experiences into the classroom to encourage and enliven class discussion;
- h) check your procedures to encourage cooperation rather than competition, compromise and consensus rather than conflict, and civility and concern for the common good rather than individual benefit and aggrandizement;
- i) and finally, require your students to develop and exercise their thinking skills constantly, consistently, and daily.

Becoming a really good social studies teacher is difficult, demanding, never ceasing, and sometimes frustrating. But the rewards are beyond measurement. When at some future class reunion a former student takes you aside to say, “You were the best teacher I had in school,” or another says, “You taught me how to think” -- then you realize that you have received the highest accolades that a teacher can earn.